

MAY 1997



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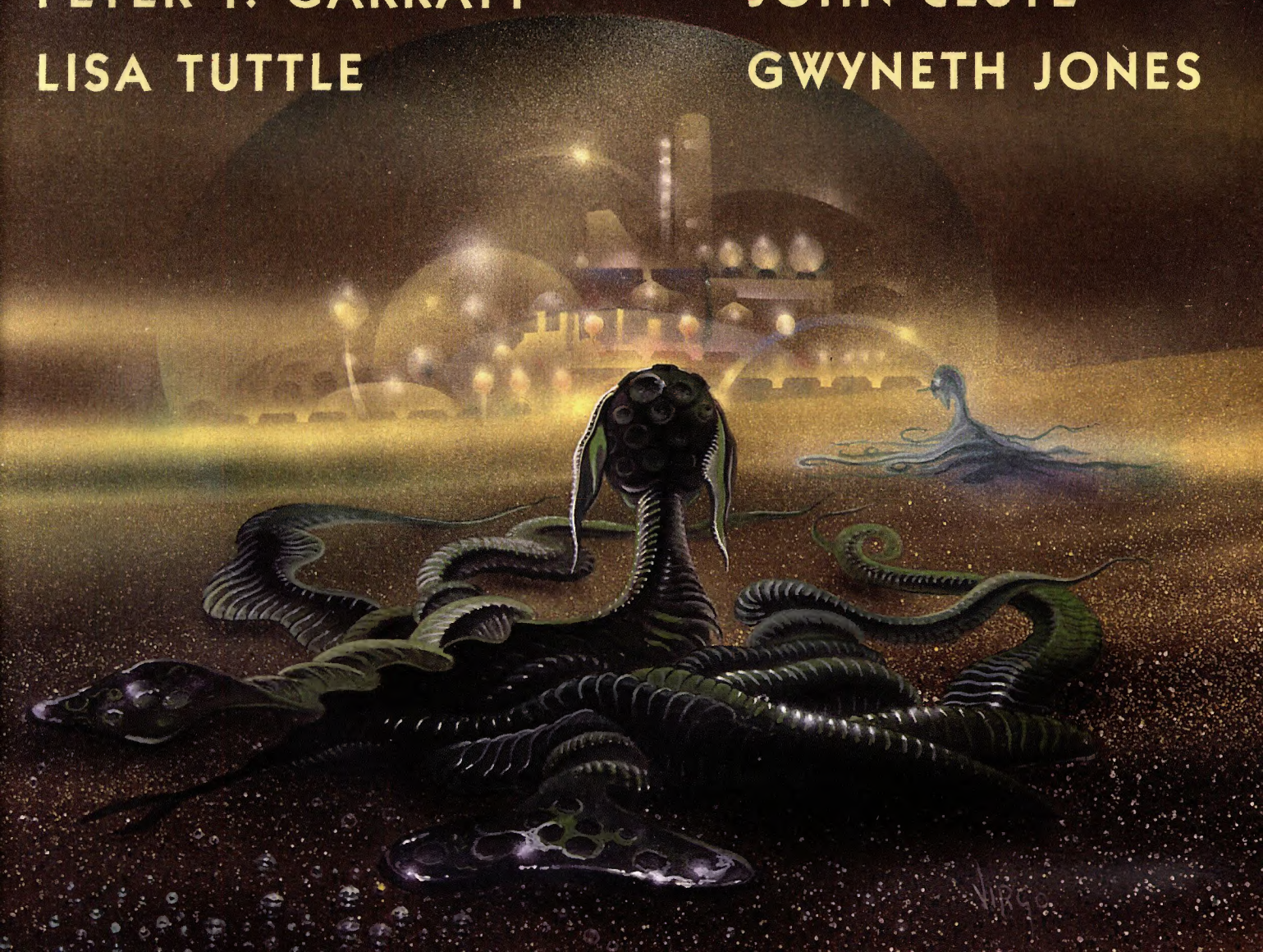
**GENE WOLFE**

AND NON-FICTION BY

**WENDY BRADLEY**

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# THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF FANTASY

JOHN CLUTE AND JOHN GRANT

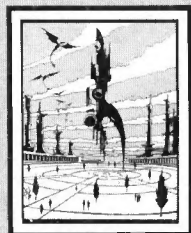


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# interZone

May 1997

119

science fiction & fantasy

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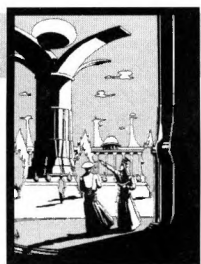
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## + Interface +

In the January 1997 *Interzone* we asked readers to vote on their favourite (and least favourite) stories published

in the magazine during 1996. Sixty-six ballots were received by the 1st March deadline, a quite sufficient number to give a valid result – 39 were from male readers, 18 from female readers and nine from persons of sex unknown. Our thanks to everyone who participated. As is customary, we subtracted all negative mentions from positive ones to arrive at the following scores. The total number of stories published last year was 65; but to save space, and embarrassment for those who came at the bottom of the heap, we list only the top 50 stories here.

### Story Poll Results 1996

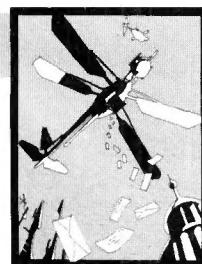
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The remaining 15 stories all scored less than two points. As you can see, Baxter & Brown and Molly Brown vied for top place this year, with B & B just pipping Molly for first place. Barry Bayley came a very respectable third, and new writer Dominic Green was a creditable fourth (quite an achievement for him). Eric Brown's other two collaborations, with Keith Brooke, also scored in the top ten – clearly it was a good year for writers whose surnames begin with "B"! Congratulations to all these authors on doing so well, and indeed to all the others who scored in the top 20.

Artists' and non-fiction writers' poll results should appear in the next issue of *Interzone*.

David Pringle



Dear Editors:  
I'm afraid I groaned when I read David Pringle's "Let's Hear it for the Mainstream" ("Interface," *IZ* 116).

Yes, there are great books which are sf or related, but not written by genre writers – but why should this means the term "science fiction" is redundant? There are novels centred around murders which aren't marketed as crime (e.g. Peter Ackroyd's *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*), but if anyone argued this finished the crime novel as a genre we'd all move to the other side of the bar and try not to meet their eye.

For me science fiction is a loose term for a particular type of literature. I've always considered genre sf as simply being those works written by authors who, for artistic and/or financial reasons, concentrate mainly on sf, whilst non-genre writers are either those whose work is usually outside any definition of sf, but nevertheless can occasionally be classified as such, or those who have written a lot of work which could almost have been published with an "sf" on the spine but who are outside the sf culture (e.g. Peter Ackroyd, Alasdair Gray).

Sf critics often remark there is good sf outside genre territories: certainly they should bring them to their readers attention – but the intention seems to be more than that: as if to say sf doesn't really exist, it's all literature, we shouldn't have boundaries. Surely these same critics would be exasperated to go into a music store, ask where the reggae section is, only to be told, "Oh, we don't have artificial divisions like that any more, after all it's all music isn't it?" and have to browse through the entire stock to find what reggae they have. Just as I have preferences in music, so I have preferences in reading, one of which is sf, and so I find it useful to have the sf books together (as I say, should there be books of sf interest but not published as such then, as *Interzone* does, I like them to be brought to my attention). The boundaries to any definition of sf should be as if drawn in chalk – not built in bricks, barbed wire and with a Checkpoint Charlie. Clearly there are those fans who want a fortress sf as their little stamp of individuality – to see themselves as belonging to an elite (rather than a group who gather to enjoy a shared interest). If part of the reason for the article was to fight against that, it's an aim I support wholeheartedly.

However I have my doubts that this was the sole reason. In Gardner Dozois's latest "Year's Best" anthology he says how he was shocked to find many UK sf fans disliked *Interzone*: he rightly points out how stupid this is. I suspect this hostility reflects the resentment felt by some fans to developments arising from the mid-1960s New Wave (*IZ* is clearly



## + Interaction +

closer in spirit to the teachings of St Moorcock than St Campbell). For me the reason sf is still exciting is mainly due to the influence of the New Wave: but I have to admit an irritation with some of the critical assumptions that came with it. One which communicates itself most clearly is an apparent embarrassment with sf as a genre: I'm sure this is the root of the more reactionary fans' hostility, a suspicion that the critics, and some of the writers, would be far happier without aliens, starships and the future beyond Thursday week.

Also conveyed is a wish that sf would roll over and die, so its imminent death is regularly announced – John Clute's tendency, when confronted with an sf work which is manifestly rooted in the genre yet is clearly a major work, is to say, "ah yes, but this is the type of book which can only be produced towards the end of a genre's lifetime" (e.g. *Book of the New Sun, Hyperion*). I also seem to recall that Asimov's passing was a double fatality. I have to add that I always thoroughly enjoy John Clute's writing, even when he's trying to push the protesting body into the coffin.

David Pringle argues that having sf as a genre denies its appreciation by the mainstream. But I think this is missing something important: for other non-science-fictional genres are appreciated, e.g. Crime, Gothic and Historical – it's what sf is that upsets the mainstream critics, not the fact it is a genre. I'm afraid we're in there with Romance, Horror and the Western. I suspect it's tied in with the two-cultures thing, Art versus Science. I've just been reading Brian Appleyard's *Understanding the Present* which seems to reflect an unease with science held by some in the arts (Appleyard has decided that all present-day crises of self and culture are the result of the success of science). I believe there are those in science fiction who yearn for approval from the literary mainstream – wanting to join the party, but find themselves brooding in the kitchen after getting the cold shoulder (ostracized for mixing with the wrong sort) and so planning to drop their unfashionable friends.

In the early 1970s there was an attempt to change the "s" in sf from "science" to "speculative," and whilst I agree with the main reason – quite clearly much of what is called sf doesn't have a strong scientific element – I'd be against it because I suspect another reason is the hope we will be clutched into the bosom of mainstream literature ("look, we've bettered ourselves – barely an alien, a starship, or a date you'd have to wait years to cross off your calendar, to be seen").

To end, in 1962 Judith Merril wrote, in her *Seventh Annual SF* anthology: "The specialized cult of sf... is rapidly disappearing as the essential quality is absorbed into the main body of literature." That was 35 years ago – I would

suggest that both Merrill and Pringle are wrong and have misread the situation. Judith Merril was closer to the mark when, in the same piece, she refers to "the floating island nature" of sf: sometimes it bumps into the mainland/mainstream, at others it sails off into the wild blue. I think I prefer literature like that, as a collection of floating islands with periods of isolation where a unique evolution of ideas can take place, later colliding with other islands to allow cross-fertilization. I'm happy for there to be no literary Gondwanaland if it means we have Madagascar, Galapagos and Australia.

**Steven Pearce**

*Hatfield, Herts.*

**Editor:** *That's a nice concluding metaphor, Mr Pearce, and I'm sure most of us agree with its message. My editorial piece in IZ 116 was written partly out of exasperation with what seems to me to be a relatively new situation: namely, the fact that for most people (the fabled "general public") sf = sci-fi = Doctor Who, Star Trek and Star Wars. Many people don't even know that a body of writing called "science fiction" exists – or, at any rate, if they're vaguely aware of it they assume that it's all spun off from film and TV or else consists of material identical to those sf films and TV shows they happen to have seen. What I fear is that sf as a literature has become invisible to the world at large. Maybe I exaggerate, maybe it has always been this way, but to me it feels as though the situation has worsened in the past decade or so.*

**Dear Editors:**

I've been reading your July 1996 issue (yes, I'm that far behind on my reading), and after I'd enjoyed the stories in the front of the magazine, I was checking out the book-review section. In your "Spinoffery" section, you listed the reprint of August Derleth's *The Mask of Cthulhu*, "first published in the USA, 1958; it consists of six pastiche H. P. Lovecraft stories." August Derleth? Pastiche as spinoffery? Is this a new definition of "spinoffery" I haven't heard about?

The stories collected in *The Mask of Cthulhu* were first published in *Weird Tales* and similar magazines. *Mask* was first published by Arkham House (founded by Derleth, by the way) in 1958, and reprinted in Great Britain by Neville Spearman in 1974. This represents a portion of the fantasy that Derleth was producing for *Weird Tales* and such, and is consistent with his work in the Cthulhu Mythos, which included concluding several stories left unfinished by Lovecraft. I'm not saying this stuff is deathless literature; it's just that I didn't know stories printed as long as 50 years ago in a horror sub-genre counted as "spinoffery."

Well, if you wish to continue to call this "spinoffery," go ahead... but the next time you receive any reprints of early Bloch or Lumley, I expect you to treat them in the same manner... not to mention Terry Brooks and a few dozen Tolkienites...

**David Clark**

*San Ramon, California*

**Editor:** *We count "sequels by other hands" as a type of spinoffery. Cthulhu was an entity created by Lovecraft, so when Derleth and others wrote Cthulhu stories they were producing sequels by other hands (of a sort). Such kinds of stories are by no means new: world literature is full of them. After a decade of resting on his laurels, Cervantes was goaded into writing part two of Don Quixote (1615) when a writer called Avelaneda came out with an unauthorized sequel to his part one. Nor was this an isolated example, as sequels by other hands had been common in 16th-century Spain (the leading country for prose fiction in that period, perhaps because it was then top-dog nation): there were, for example, many sequels to the best-known chivalric romances (e.g. Amadis of Gaul), and picaresque novels (e.g. Lazarillo de Tormes). So: nothing new under the sun!*

**Dear Editors:**

This is a plea on behalf of Philip Pullman, and particularly his award-winning novel *Northern Lights*. Your mention of it in issue 116 was almost cursory and its tone was disdainful. I will admit that this novel comes from the same publishers that have brought young adults such delights as the distressing Point SF and Point Fantasy imprints, not to mention the risible *Goosebumps*. I would agree that most science-fiction and fantasy readers consider themselves above anything labelled "Young Adult" or "Juvenile," and in most cases rightly so.

To re-use an expression you coined in issue 116: believe the hype. There is more to this novel than I had expected, more indeed than you might find in nine out of ten sub-Eddings fantasy doorstops written by "credible" adult-oriented authors. While it follows a familiar quest format and contains the kind of talking animals popularized by Brian Jacques or William Horwood, it has much to recommend it.

Most importantly it is thoughtful and imaginative. Pullman creates a parallel Earth different enough to intrigue, so much so that the reader seeks out and revels in the similarities between Pullman's world and our own. The novel also has a philosophical edge which goes further than the creation of a religion or a political movement analogous to our own. Pullman envisages a relationship between philosophy, religion and science which is thought-provoking, not to mention his expression of the distinction and connection between the body and the soul. It falls somewhere between the society-building of Mary Gentle and Samuel Delany.

In many cases the successful imagining of a cultural backdrop or a wealth of natty gadgetry will be at the expense of the emotional depth of the characters (Neal Stephenson and Paul J. McAuley both suffer from this). This is not a trap Pullman falls into. The relationships between the characters are complex and believable, and the relationships between the characters and their daemons is



emotive without being overly sentimental. In this respect Pullman reminds me of Lisa Tuttle, particularly her latest, *The Pillow Friend*.

I cannot recommend this novel highly enough. Booksellers should be pouncing on it and putting it in "SF" as well as "Kids," so that self-conscious adults can discover it without embarrassment.

**David Burrows**

Camberley, Surrey

**Editor:** You are referring to our "Books Received" mention of the paperback edition of the novel (IZ 116), which was not meant to be disdainful in tone (I'm sorry if it sounded that way to you). We did in fact give Pullman's book a much fuller review in issue 110, under its American title of *The Golden Compass* (Knopf, \$20). The British publishers did not send us their first edition, which implies they never saw the novel as more than a children's book (yes, we still suffer from an entrenched class system in this country); presumably it took the enthusiasm of the US publishers to open their UK counterparts' eyes to the novel's "crossover" potential. In his review in IZ 110, Paul McAuley said:

"Although at heart *The Golden Compass* is a coming-of-age narrative told with a beguiling clarity, it is also crammed with virtues that engage more mature readers: a tough, brave and resourceful heroine; a richly-imagined alternative history in which magic is the primary mode of natural philosophy, and humans are each symbiotically bonded to a shape-changing daemon whose form becomes fixed at adulthood; and an intricate story told in a fastidiously direct yet transparent and evocative prose.... In the wide field of fantasy, at present overgrown with thickets of too often commercially inspired and clichéd whimsy concerning telepathic dragons or cats, sword and sorcery, urban elves or cod-Renaissance romances, *The Golden Compass* is a genuine original. Knopf's edition is beautifully produced, but British readers shouldn't be ashamed to search out the paperback edition on the shelves of children's literature."

Dear Editors:

Paul Brazier ("Interaction," IZ 116) is making the mistake that all too many literary critics make; substituting "quality" as a synonym for "taste." In other words, he is a snob.

Paul Brazier argues that reading involves a certain amount of work: "choosing and buying the next book or magazine, and finding a place and a time to read it." Television, he claims, minimizes this. Clearly he has never made selective use of the *Radio Times*, a good read in itself and the magazine equivalent of a bookshelf. He also seems to imagine that all books or magazines are available at all times, when in fact the marketing of books is not totally unlike that of TV programmes. Some books are available almost constantly (for "second-hand" TV turn to UK Gold) whilst others have their seasons. Even

second-hand bookshops suffer from this sad transience. As for reading at one's own choice of time and space, the video recorder has had a liberating effect. As a commuter, I hardly ever watch my small, carefully selected choice of television programmes at the broadcast time.

Paul also confuses structure with quality. Not all TV programmes can be "dipped into" and not all books offer a compelling read from start to finish. In a novel, what happens in chapter one can and should materially affect the events of, say, chapter eight, and it is this structure which *Babylon 5* follows. It is not that it has a five-year story arc that is so compelling, but that it is a televised novel with occasionally discrete episodes. Paul might want to think how much he would get out of a novel if he only read chapter ten. In contrast, *Star Trek, ST: The Next Generation* and initially, but now to a lesser extent, *Deep Space Nine* and *Voyager*, follow the short-story format where it is both possible to dip in and out of the text and for the author and readership to construct that popular sf text, the "fix-up." None of these statements is a discussion of quality. Paul might be right about the quality of dialogue and acting on *B-5* but I am afraid that the same can be said of much of the *Star Trek* stable, but these are different issues. It is also worth noting that as in much written sf, it is not the characterization but the ideas that attract readers, the same is true for *Babylon 5*, and for that you need to read the novel so far...

**Farah Mendlesohn**

York

**Paul Brazier replies:** I did not use the term "quality" as a synonym for "taste." I confess readily to being a *Star Trek* addict, but would never claim that *ST* is unqualifiedly good. *ST* is extremely patchy; some episodes have superb stories badly acted, some have terrible stories well acted, and there are all shades between. Examples? I find it impossible to conceive of a good "Q" episode of *ST:TNG*, or one featuring a holodeck malfunction, or one featuring Data as Sherlock Holmes, although they are usu-

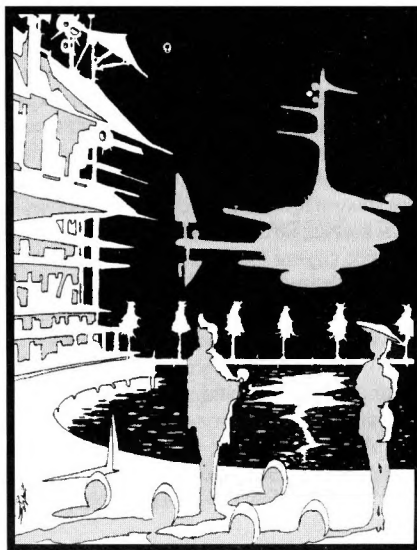
ally superbly produced; whereas, when Patrick Stewart gets to act properly, as in the episode after the Borg take him over and he returns to his very English French family (Jeremy Kemp and Samantha Eggar, for heaven's sake), I can forgive the minimal sf content for the superb story-telling and acting presented. *ST:DS9* improved vastly when it became less the *Little House on the Wormhole* and more the fortification on the edge of civilization, although I still find the latter-day inclusion of a buffoon in *ST* (Quark in *DS9*, Neelix in *Voyager*) immensely irritating. I also confess to the human propensity to believe that things I enjoy are good, things I don't enjoy are bad, but I believe I can tell the difference. I enjoy 1950s sf movies, but the only one I would make any claim of quality for would be *Forbidden Planet* – I actually enjoy watching the badness of the others. And this is true of much of my watching of sf on TV.

As for the contention that I confuse structure with quality, this is just nonsense. Television is a mass entertainment medium, and any claim that you can't comment if you haven't seen all of a particular programme, especially one as long as this, is daft. And the comparison with a novel is equally ridiculous. I can sit and read an entire novel in an evening; how long would it take to watch the entire five-year story arc of *B-5*? I defy you also to watch any episode of *The Crow Road* and not be so impressed that you had to go back and find the other episodes and watch them. That is real quality. Just recently I have found myself watching *X-Files* instead of *ST* because Sky has changed its schedules. Now I watched some *X-Files* originally, and found them wanting. I have tried again, and still there is the same plank-like acting-out of stories with no real point or conclusion that I disliked so much the first time I watched. Discussing this with a friend recently who is an avowed *B-5* fan, he opined, unprompted by me, that it would be nice if Straczynski occasionally tried a second draft of his scripts – and this was a fan!

There is loads of bad sf out there in telly-land, and loads of people lap it up. Just because someone has a five-year vision is no reason to take him seriously, but his vision lasted anyway, because it had the power of a real vision. I have no idea whether or not Straczynski's vision will last, but I have never seen acting anywhere near as bad as in *B-5*, except perhaps in *Plan 9 From Outer Space* (a film I love).

Dear Editors:

In his dissertation (IZ 116) in response to the "rather bewildering correspondence" regarding sf on TV, Paul Brazier is quite correct: arguing the case for a series based on either epic story arcs or a collective of intergalactic meritocracies is pointless. But his analogy with consuming differing taxable drugs





# All Tomorrow's Parties

*Paul J. McAuley*

And with exactly a year left before the end of the century-long gathering of her clade, she went to Paris with her current lover, racing ahead of midnight and the beginning of the New Year. Paris! The Premier Quartier: the early Twentieth Century. Fireworks bursting in great flowers above the night-black Seine, and a brawling carnival which under a multi-coloured rain of confetti filled every street from the Quai du Louvre to the Arc de Triomphe.

Escorted by her lover (they had been hunting big game in the Pleistocene-era taiga of Siberia; he still wore his safari suit, and a Springfield rifle was slung over his shoulder), she crossed to the Palaeolithic oak woods of the Ile de la Cité. In the middle of the great stone circle naked druids with blue-stained skins beat huge drums under flaring torches, while holographic ghosts swung above the electric lights of the Twentieth Century shore, a fleet of luminous clouds dancing in the sky. Her attentive lover identified them for her, leaning against her shoulder so she could sight along his arm. He was exactly her height, with piercing blue eyes and a salt-and-pepper beard.

An astronaut. A gene pirate. Emperor Victoria. Mickey Mouse.

"What is a mouse?"

He pointed. "That one, the black-skinned creature with the circular ears."

She leaned against his solid human warmth. "For an animal, it seems very much like a person. Was it a product of the gene wars?"

"It is a famous icon of the country where I was born. My countrymen preferred creatures of the imagination to those of the real world. It is why they produced so few good authors."

"But you were a good author."

"I was not bad, except at the end. Something bad always happened to all good writers from my country. Sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly, but without exception."

"What is it carrying?"

"A light sabre. It is an imaginary weapon that is authentic for the period. They were obsessed with weapons and divisions. They saw the world as a struggle of good against evil. That was how wars could be called good, except by those who fought in them."

She didn't argue. Her lover, a partial, had been modelled on a particular Twentieth Century writer, and had direct access to the appropriate records in the Library. Although she had been born just at the end of the Twentieth Century, she had long ago forgotten everything about it.

Behind them, the drums reached a frenzied climax

and fell silent. The sacrificial victim writhed on the heel stone and the chief druid lifted the still beating heart above his head in triumph. Blood that looked black in the torchlight ran down his arms.

The spectators beyond the circle clapped or toasted each other. One man was trying to persuade his companion to fuck on the altar. They were invisible to the druids, who were merely puppets lending local colour to the scene.

"I'm getting tired of this," she said.

"Of course. We could go to Cuba. The ocean fishing there is good. Or to Afrique, to hunt lions. I think I liked that best, but after a while I could no longer do it. That was one of the things that destroyed my writing."

"I'm getting tired of you," she said, and her lover bowed and walked away.

She was getting tired of everything.

She had been getting tired of everything for longer than she could remember. What was the point of living forever if you did nothing new? Despite all her hopes, this *faux* Earth, populated by two billion puppets and partials, and ten million of her clade, had failed to revive her.

In one more year, the fleet of spaceships would disperse; the sun, an ordinary G2 star she had moved by the pressure of its own light upon gravity tethered reflective sails, would go supernova; nothing would be saved but the store of information which the Library had collected and collated. She had not yet accessed any of that. Perhaps that would save her.

She returned to the carnival, stayed there three days. But despite use of various intoxicants she could not quite lose herself in it, could not escape the feeling that she had failed after all. This was supposed to be a great congress of her own selves, a place to share and exchange memories that spanned five million years and the entire Galaxy. But it seemed to her that the millions of her selves simply wanted to forget what they were, to lose themselves in the pleasures of the flesh. Of course, many had assumed bodies for the first time to attend the gathering; one could perhaps excuse them, for this carnival was to them a genuine farewell to flesh they would abandon at the end of the year.

On the third day she was sitting in cold dawn light at a green café table in the Jardin des Tuileries, by the great fountain. Someone was sculpting the clouds through which the sun was rising. The café was crowded with guests, partials and puppets, androids and animals – even a silver gynoid, its face a smooth oval mirror. The air buzzed with the tiny machines which attended the guests; in one case, a swirling cloud



of gnat-sized beads *was* a guest. After almost a century in costume, the guests were reverting to type.

She sipped a *citron pressé*, listened to the idle chatter. The party in Paris would break up soon. The revellers would disperse to other parts of the Earth. Except for a clean-up crew, the puppets, partials and all the rest would be returned to store. At another table, a youthful version of her erstwhile lover was talking to an older man with brown hair brushed back from his high forehead and pale blue eyes magnified by the thick lenses of his spectacles.

"The lions, Jim. Go to Afrique and listen to the lions roar at night. There is no sound like it."

"Ah, and I would love that, but Nora would not stand it. She needs the comforts of civilization. Besides, the thing we must not forget is that I would not be able to see the lions. Instead I think we will drink some more of this fine white wine and you will tell me about them."

"Aw hell, I could bring you a living lion if you like," the younger man said. "I could describe him to you and you could touch him and smell him until you got the idea." He was quite unaware that there were two lions right there in the park, accompanying a naked girl child whose feet, with pigeon's wings at the ankles, did not quite touch the ground.

Did these puppets come here every day, and recreate a conversation millions of years dead for the delectation of the guests? Was each day to them the same day? Suddenly, she felt as if a cold wind was blowing through her, as if she was raised up high and naked upon the pinnacle of the mountain of her millions of years.

"You confuse the true and the real," someone said. A man's voice, soft, lisping. She looked around but could not see who amongst the amazing people and creatures might have said such a thing, the truest realest thing she had heard for... how long? She could not remember how long.

She left, and went to New Orleans.

Where it was night, and raining, a soft warm rain falling in the lamplit streets. It was the Twentieth Century here, too. They were cooking crawfish under the mimosa trees at every intersection of the brick paved streets, and burning the Maid of New Orleans over Lake Pontchartrain. The Maid hung up there in the black night sky – wrapped in oiled silks and shining like a star, with the blue-white wheel of the Galaxy a backdrop that spanned the horizon – then flamed like a comet and plunged into the black water while cornet bands played *Laissez le Bon Temps Rouler*.

She fell in with a trio of guests whose originals were all less than a thousand years old. They were students of the Rediscovery, they said, although it was not quite clear what the Rediscovery was. They wore green ("For Earth," one said, although she thought that odd because most of the Earth was blue), and drank a mild psychotropic called absinthe, bitter white stuff poured into water over a sugar cube held in silver tongs. They were interested in the origins of the clade, which amused her greatly, because of course she was its origin, going amongst the copies and clones disguised as her own self. But even if they made her feel every one of her five million years, she liked their innocence, their energy, their openness.

She strolled with her new friends through the great orrery at the waterfront. Its display of the lost natural wonders of the Galaxy was derived from records and memories guests had deposited in the Library, and changed every day. She was listening to the three students discuss the possibility that humans had not originally come from the Earth when someone went past and said loudly, looking right at her, "None of them look like you, but they are just like you all the same. All obsessed with the past because they are trapped in it."

A tall man with a black, spade-shaped beard and black eyes that looked at her with infinite amusement. The same soft, lisping voice she had heard in the café in Paris. He winked and plunged into the heart of the white-hot whirlpool of the accretion disc of the black hole of Sigma Draconis 2, which drew matter from the photosphere of its companion blue-white giant – before the reconstruction, it had been one of the wonders of the Galaxy. She followed, but he was gone.

She looked for him everywhere in New Orleans, and fell in with a woman who before the gathering had lived in the water vapour zone of a gas giant, running a tourist business for those who could afford to download themselves into the ganglia of living blimps a kilometre across. The woman's name was Rapha; she had ruled the worlds of a hundred stars once, but had given that up long before she had answered the call for the gathering.

"I was a man when I had my empire," Rapha said, "but I gave that up too. When you've done everything, what's left but to party?"

She had always been a woman, she thought. And for two million years she had ruled an empire of a million worlds – for all she knew, the copy she had left behind ruled there still. But she didn't tell Rapha that. No one knew who she was, on all the Earth. She said, "Then let's party until the end of the world."

She knew that it wouldn't work – she had already tried everything, in every combination – but because she didn't care if it worked or not, perhaps this time it would.

They raised hell in New Orleans, and went to Antarctica.

It was raining in Antarctica, too.

It had been raining for a century, ever since the world had been made.

Statite sails hung in stationary orbit, reflecting sunlight so that the swamps and cycad forests and volcanic mountain ranges of the South Pole were in perpetual day. The hunting lodge was on a floating island a hundred metres above the tops of the giant ferns, close to the edge of a shallow viridescent lake. A flock of delicate, dappled *Dromiceiomimus* squealed and splashed in the shallows; great dragonflies flitted through the rainy middle air; at the misty horizon the perfect cones of three volcanoes sent up threads of smoke into the sagging clouds.

She and Rapha rode bubbles in wild loops above the forests, chasing dinosaurs or goading dinosaurs to chase them. Then they plunged into one of the volcanoes and caused it to erupt, and one of the hunters overrode the bubbles and brought them back and politely asked them to stop.



The lake and the forest were covered in a mantle of volcanic ash. The sky was milky with ash.

"The guests are amused, but they will not be amused for ever. It is the hunting that is important here. If I may suggest other areas where you might find enjoyment..."

He was a slightly younger version of her last lover. A little less salt in his beard; a little more spring in his step.

She said, "How many of you have I made?"

But he didn't understand the question.

They went to Thebes (and some of the hunting party went with them), where they ran naked and screaming through the streets, toppling the statues of the gods. They went to Greenland, and broke the rainbow bridge of Valhalla and fought the trolls and ran again, laughing, with Odin's thunder about their ears. Went to Troy, and set fire to the wooden horse before the Greeks could climb inside it.

None of it mattered. The machines would repair everything; the puppets would resume their roles. Troy would fall again the next night, on schedule.

"Let's go to Golgotha," Rapha said, wild-eyed, very drunk.

This was in a bar of some Christian-era American town. Outside, a couple of the men were roaring up and down the main street on motorcycles, weaving in and out of the slow-moving, candy coloured cars. Two cops watched indulgently.

"Or Afrique," Rapha said. "We could hunt man-apes."

"I've done it before," someone said. He didn't have a name, but some kind of number. He was part of a clone. His shaved head was horribly scarred; one of his eyes was mechanical. He said, "You hunt them with spears or slings. They're pretty smart, for man-apes. I got killed twice."

Someone came into the bar. Tall, saturnine, black eyes, a spade-shaped beard. At once, she asked her machines if he was a partial or a guest, but the question confused them. She asked them if there were any strangers in the world, and at once they told her that there were the servants and those of her clade, but no strangers.

He said softly, "Are you having a good time?"

"Who are you?"

"Perhaps I'm the one who whispers in your ear, 'Remember that you are mortal.' Are you mortal, Angel?"

No one in the world should know her name. Her true name.

*Danger, danger*, someone sang in the background of the song that was playing on the jukebox. *Danger*, burred the coffee pot on the heater behind the counter of the bar.

She said, "I made you, then."

"Oh no. Not me. You made all of this. Even all of the guests, in one way or another. But not me. We can't talk here. Try the one place which has any use in this *faux* world. There's something there I'm going to take, and when I've done that I'll wait for you."

"Who are you? What do you want?"

"Perhaps I want to kill you." He smiled. "And perhaps you want to die. It's one thing you have not tried yet."

He walked away, and when she started after him

Rapha got in the way. Rapha hadn't seen the man. She said the others wanted to go to Hy Brasil.

"The gene wars," Rapha said. "That's where we started to become what we are. And then – I don't know, but it doesn't matter. We're going to party to the end of the world. When the sun explodes, I'm going to ride the shock wave as far as I can. I'm not going back. There's a lot of us who aren't going back. Why should we? We went to get copied and woke up here, thousands of years later, thousands of light years away. What's to go back for? Wait! Where are you going?"

"I don't know," she said, and walked out.

The man had scared her. He had touched the doubt which had made her organise the gathering. She wanted a place to hide so that she could think about that before she confronted him.

Most of the North American continent was, in one form or another, modelled after the Third Millennium of the Christian Era. She took a car (a red Dodge as big as a boat, with fins and chrome trim) and drove to Dallas, where she was attacked by tribes of horsemen near the glittering slag of the wrecked city. She took up with a warlord for a while, poisoned all his wives, grew bored and seduced his son, who murdered his father and began a civil war. She went south on horseback through the alien flower jungles which had conquered Earth after humanity had more or less abandoned it, then caught a *pneumatique* all the way down the spine of Florida to Key West.

A version of her last lover lived there, too. She saw him in a bar by the beach two weeks later. There were three main drugs in Key West: cigarettes, heroin, and alcohol. She had tried them all, decided she liked alcohol best. It helped you forget yourself in an odd, dissociative way that was both pleasant and disturbing. Perhaps she should have spent more of her long life drunk.

This version of her lover liked alcohol, too. He was both lumbering but shy, pretending not to notice the people who looked at him while he drank several complicated cocktails. He had thickened at the waist; his beard was white and full. His eyes, webbed by wrinkles, were still piercingly blue, but his gaze was vague and troubled. She eavesdropped while he talked with the barkeep. She wanted to find out how the brash man who had to constantly prove himself against the world had turned out.

Badly, it seemed. The world was unforgiving, and his powers were fading.

"I lost her, Carlos," he told barkeep. He meant his muse. "She's run out on me, the bitch."

"Now, Papa, you know that is not true," the young barkeep said. "I read your article in *Life* just last week."

"It was shit, Carlos. I can fake it well enough, but I can't do the good stuff any more. I need some quiet, and all day I get tourists trying to take my picture and spooking the cats. When I was younger I could work all day in a café, but now I need... hell, I don't know what I need. She's a bitch, Carlos. She only loves the young." Later, he said, "I keep dreaming of lions. One of the long white beaches in Afrique where the lions come down at dusk. They play there like cats, and I want to get to them, but I can't."

But Carlos was attending to another customer. Only she heard the old man. Later, after he had gone, she talked with Carlos herself. He was a puppet, and couldn't understand, but it didn't matter.

"All this was a bad idea," she said. She meant the bar, Key West, the Pacific Ocean, the world. "Do you want to know how it started?"

"Of course, ma'am. And may I bring you another drink?"

"I think I have had enough. You stay there and listen. Millions of years ago, while all of what would become humanity lived on the nine worlds and thousand worldlets around a single star in the Sky Hunter arm of the Galaxy, there was a religion which taught that individuals need never die. It was this religion which first drove humanity from star to star in the Galaxy. Individuals copied their personalities into computers, or cloned themselves, or spread their personalities through flocks of birds, or fish, or amongst hive insects. But there was one flaw in this religion. After millions of years, many of its followers were no longer human in form or in thought, except that they could trace back, generation upon generation, their descent from a single human ancestor. They had become transcendents, and each individual transcendent had become a clade, or an alliance, of millions of different minds. Mine is merely one of many, but it is one of the oldest, and one of the largest.

"I brought us here to unite us all in shared experiences. It isn't possible that one of us could have seen every wonder in the Galaxy, visit every world. There are a hundred billion stars in the Galaxy. It takes a year or two to explore the worlds of each star, and then there is the travel between the stars. But there are ten million of us here. Clones, copies, descendants of clones and copies. Many of us have done nothing but explore. We have not seen everything, but we have seen most of it. I thought that we could pool all our information, that it would result in... something. A new religion, godhead. Something new, something *different*. But it seems that most just want to party, and I wonder how much I have changed, for they are so little like me. Many of them say that they will not return, that they will stay here until the sun ends it all. Some have joined in the war in China – a few even refuse regeneration. Mostly, though, they want to party."

"There are parties every night, ma'am," the barkeep said. "That's Key West for you."

"Someone was following me, but I lost him. I think he was tracing me through the travel net, but I used contemporary transport to get here. He frightened me and I ran away, but perhaps he is what I need. I think I will find him. What month is this?"

"June, ma'am. Very hot, even for June. It means a bad hurricane season."

"It will get hotter," she said, thinking of the machine ticking away in the core of the sun.

And went to Tibet, where the Library was.

For some reason, the high plateau had been constructed as a replica of part of Mars. She had given her servants a lot of discretion when building the Earth; it pleased her to be surprised, although it did not happen very often.

She had arrived at the top of one of the rugged massifs that defined the edge of the vast basin. There was a shrine here, a mani eye painted on a stone pillar, a heap of stones swamped with skeins of red and blue and white and yellow prayer flags ravelling in the cold wind. The scarp dropped away steeply to talus slopes and the flood lava of the basin's floor, a smooth, lightly cratered red plain mantled with fleets of barchan dunes. Directly below, nestling amongst birches at the foot of the scarp's sheer cliff, was the bone-white Library.

She took a day to descend the winding path. Now and then pilgrims climbed past her. Many shuffled on their knees, eyes lifted to the sky; a few fell face-forward at each step, standing up and starting again at the point where their hands touched the ground. All whirled prayer wheels and muttered their personal mantra as they climbed, and few spared her more than a glance, although at noon while she sat under a gnarled juniper one old man came to her and shared his heel of dry black bread and stringy dried yak meat. She learned from him that the pilgrims were not puppets, as she had thought, but were guests searching for enlightenment. That was so funny and so sad she did not know what to think about it.

The Library was a replica of the White Palace of the Potala. It had been a place of quiet order and contemplation, where all the stories that the clade had told each other, all the memories that they had downloaded or exchanged, had been collected and collated.

Now it was a battleground.

Saffron-robed monks armed with weaponry from a thousand different eras were fighting against man-shaped black androids. Bodies of men and machines were sprawled on the great steps; smoke billowed from the topmost ranks of the narrow windows; red and green energy beams flickered against the pink sky.

She walked through the carnage untouched. Nothing in this world could touch her. Only perhaps the man who was waiting for her, sitting cross-legged beneath the great golden Buddha, which a stray shot from some energy weapon had decapitated and half-melted to slag. On either side, hundreds of candles floated in great bowls filled with water; their lights shivered and flickered from the vibration of heavy weaponry.

The man did not open his eyes as she approached, but he said softly, "I already have what I need. These foolish monks are defending a lost cause. You should stop them."

"It is what they have to do. They can't destroy us, of course, but I could destroy you."

"Guests can't harm other guests," he said calmly. "It is one of the rules."

"I am not a guest. Nor, I think, are you."

She told her machines to remove him. Nothing happened.

He opened his eyes. He said, "Your machines are invisible to the puppets and partials you created to populate this fantasy world. I am invisible to the machines. I do not draw my energy from the world grid, but from elsewhere."

And then he leaped at her, striking with formal moves millions of years old. The Angry Grasshopper, the Rearing Horse, the Snapping Mantis. Each move,



magnified by convergent energies, could have killed her, evaporated her body, melted her machines.

But she allowed her body to respond, countering his attacks. She had thought that she might welcome death; instead, she was amused and exhilarated by the fury of her response. The habit of living was deeply ingrained; now it had found a focus.

Striking attitudes, tangling in a flurry of blows and counterblows, they moved through the battleground of the Library, through its gardens, moved down the long talus slope at the foot of the massif in a storm of dust and shattered stones.

At the edge of a lake which filled a small, perfectly circular crater, she finally tired of defensive moves and went on the attack. The Striking Eagle, the Plunging Dragon, the Springing Tiger Who Defends Her Cubs. He countered in turn. Stray energies boiled the lake dry. The dry ground shook, split open in a mosaic of plates. Gradually, a curtain of dust was raised above the land, obscuring the setting sun and the green face of the Moon, which was rising above the mountains.

They broke apart at last. They stood in the centre of a vast crater of vitrified rock. Their clothes hung in tatters about their bodies. It was night, now. Halfway up the scarp of the massif, small lightnings flashed where the monks still defended the Library.

"Who are you?" she said again. "Did I create you?"

"I'm closer to you than anyone else in this strange mad world," he said.

That gave her pause. All the guests, clones or copies or replicants, were of her direct genetic lineage.

She said, "Are you my death?"

As if in answer, he attacked again. But she fought back as forcefully as before, and when he broke off, she saw that he was sweating.

"I am stronger than you thought," she said.

He took out a small black cube from his tattered tunic. He said, "I have what I need. I have the memory core of the Library. Everything anyone who came here placed on record is here."

"Then why do you want to kill me?"

"Because you are the original. I thought it would be fitting, after I stole this."

She laughed. "You foolish man! Do you think we rely on a single physical location, a single master copy? It is the right of everyone in the clade to carry away the memories of everyone else. Why else are we gathered here?"

"I am not of your clade." He tossed the cube into the air, caught it, tucked it away. "I will use this knowledge against you. Against all of you. I have all your secrets."

"You say you are closer to me than a brother, yet you do not belong to the clade. You want to use our memories to destroy us." She had a sudden insight. "Is this war, then?"

He bowed. He was near naked, lit by the green light of the Moon and the dimming glow of the slag that stretched away in every direction. "Bravo," he said. "But it has already begun. Perhaps it is even over by now; after all, we are twenty thousand light years above the plane of the Galactic disc, thirty-five thousand light years from the hub of your Empire. It will take you that long to return. And if the war is not over, then this will finish it."

She was astonished. Then she laughed. "What an

imagination I have!"

He bowed again, and said softly, "You made this world from your imagination, but you did not imagine me."

And he went somewhere else.

Her machines could not tell her where he had gone; she called upon all the machines in the world, but he was no longer on the Earth. Nor was he amongst the fleet of ships which had carried the guests – in suspended animation, as frozen embryos, as codes triply engraved in gold – to the world she had created for the gathering.

There were only two other places he could be, and she did not think he could have gone to the sun. If he had, then he would have triggered the machine at the core, and destroyed her and everyone else in the subsequent supernova.

So she went to the Moon.

She arrived on the farside. The energies he had used against her suggested that he had his own machines, and she did not think that he would have hidden in full view of the Earth.

The machines which she had instructed to recreate the Earth for the one hundred years of the gathering had recreated the Moon, too, so that the oceans of the Earth would have the necessary tides; it had been easier than tangling gravithic resonances to produce the same effect. It had taken little extra effort to recreate the forests which had cloaked the Moon for a million years, between the first faltering footsteps and the abandonment of the Earth.

It was towards the end of the long Lunar night. All around, blue firs soared up for hundreds of metres, cloaked in wide fans of needles that in the cold and the dark had drooped down to protect the scaly trunks. The grey rocks were coated in thin snow, and frozen lichens crunched underfoot. Her machines scattered in every direction, quick as thought. She sat down on top of a big rough boulder and waited.

It was very quiet. The sky was dominated by the triple-armed pinwheel of the Galaxy. It was so big that when she looked at one edge she could not see the other. The Arm of the Warrior rose high above the arch of the Arm of the Hunter; the Arm of the Archer curved in the opposite direction, below the close horizon. Star clusters made long chains of concentrated light through the milky haze of the galactic arms. There were lines and threads and globes and clouds of stars, all fading into a general misty radiance dissected by dark lanes which barred the arms at regular intervals. The core was knitted from thin shells of stars in tidy orbits concentrically packed around the great globular clusters of the heart stars, like layers of glittering tissue wrapped around a heap of jewels.

Every star had been touched by humankind. Existing stars had been moved or destroyed; millions of new stars and planetary systems had been created by collapsing dust clouds. A garden of stars, regulated, ordered, tidied. The Library held memories of every star, every planet, every wonder of the old untamed Galaxy. She was beginning to realize that the gathering was not the start of something new, but the end of five million years of Galactic colonisation.

After a long time, the machines came back, and she went where they told her.

It was hidden within a steep-sided crater, a castle or maze of crystal vanes that rose in serried ranks from deep roots within the crust, where they collected and focused tidal energy. He was at its heart, busily folding together a small spacecraft. The energy of the vanes had been greatly depleted by the fight, and he was trying to concentrate the remainder in the motor of the spacecraft. He was preparing to leave.

Her machines rose up and began to spin, locking in resonance with the vanes and bleeding off their store of energy. The machines began to glow as she bounded down the steep smooth slope towards the floor of the crater, red-hot, white-hot, as hot as the core of the sun, for that was where they were diverting the energy stored in the vanes.

Violet threads flicked up, but the machines simply absorbed that energy too. Their stark white light flooded the crater, bleaching the ranks of crystal vanes.

She walked through the traps and tricks of the defences, pulled him from his fragile craft and took him up in a bubble of air to the neutral point between the Moon and the Earth.

"Tell me," she said. "Tell me why you came here. Tell me about the war."

He was surprisingly calm. He said, "I am a first generation clone, but I am on the side of humanity, not the transcendents. Transcendent clades are a danger to all of the variety within and between the civilizations in the Galaxy. At last the merely human races have risen against them. I am just one weapon in the greatest war ever fought."

"You are my flesh. You are of my clade."

"I am a secret agent. I was made from a single cell stolen from you several hundred years before you set off for this fake Earth and the gathering of your clade. I arrived only two years ago, grew my power source, came down to steal the memory core and kill you. Although I failed to kill you before, we are no longer in the place where you draw your power. Now –"

After a moment in which nothing happened, he screamed in frustration and despair. She pitied him. Pitied all those who had bent their lives to produce this poor vessel, this failed moment, although all the power, the intrigues and desperate schemes his presence implied were as remote from her as the politics of a termite nest.

She said, "Your power source is not destroyed, but my machines take all its energy. Why did your masters think us dangerous?"

"Because you would fill the Galaxy with your own kind. Because you would end human evolution. Because you will not accept that the Universe is greater than you can ever be. Because you refuse to die, and death is a necessary part of evolution."

She laughed. "Silly little man! Why would we accept limits? We are only doing what humanity has always done. We use science to master nature just as man-apes changed their way of thinking by making tools and using fire. Humanity has always striven to become more than it is, to grow spiritually and morally and intellectually, to go up to the edge and step over it."

For the first time in a million years, those sentiments did not taste of ashes. By trying to destroy her, he had shown her what her life was worth.

He said, "But you do not change. That is why you are

so dangerous. You and the other clades of transhumans have stopped humanity evolving. You would fill the Galaxy with copies of a dozen individuals who are so scared of physical death that they will do any strange and terrible thing to themselves to survive."

He gestured at the blue-white globe that hung beneath their feet, small and vulnerable against the vast blackness between galaxies.

"Look at your Earth! Humanity left it four million years ago, yet you chose to recreate it for this gathering. You had a million years of human history on Earth to choose from, and four and a half billion years of the history of the planet itself, and yet almost half of your creation is given over to a single century."

"It is the century where we became what we are," she said, remembering Rapha. "It is the century when it became possible to become transhuman, when humanity made the first steps beyond the surface of a single planet."

"It is the century you were born in. You would freeze all history if you could, an eternity of the same thoughts thought by the same people. You deny all possibilities but your own self."

He drew himself up, defiant to the last. He said, "My ship will carry the memory core home without me. You take all, and give nothing. I give my life, and I give you this."

He held up something as complex and infolded as the throat of an orchid. It was a vacuum fluctuation, a hole in reality that when inflated would remove them from the Universe. She looked away at once – the image was already burned in her brain – and threw him into the core of the sun. He did not even have a chance to scream.

Alone in her bubble of air, she studied the wheel of the Galaxy, the ordered pattern of braids and clusters. Light was so slow. It took a hundred thousand years to cross from one edge of the Galaxy to the other. Had the war against her empire, and the empires of all the other transcendents, already ended? Had it already changed the Galaxy, stirred the stars into new patterns? She would not know until she returned, and that would take thirty-five thousand years.

But she did not have to return. In the other direction was the limitless Universe, a hundred billion galaxies. She hung there a long time, watching little smudges of ancient light resolve out of the darkness. Empires of stars wherever she looked, wonders without end.

We will fight the war, she thought, and we shall win, and we will go on for ever and ever.

And went down, found the bar near the beach. She would wait until the old man came in, and buy him a drink, and talk to him about his dream of the lions.

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**Paul J. McAuley** won last year's Arthur C. Clarke Award for his novel *Fairyland*. His latest novel, *Child of the River*, will be published by Gollancz in September 1997; the above story is a free-standing "prequel" (by five million years) to that book, which will be the first volume of a trilogy. A resident of St Andrews, Scotland, for a number of years, Paul recently gave up his job there and moved to a freelance life in London.





# Soul Song

*Lisa Tuttle*

**A**ll that summer I listened to Craithe's last symphony. I'm not a great fan of classical music, and especially not the modern, atonal stuff, but Craithe's final work was an exception, and I had a soft spot for it that was purely personal. The CD had been a present from an ex-lover who was very knowledgeable about music (unlike me), and the symphony had been playing on his car radio the first night I went home with him; in some way, I felt, the achingly sweet swell of the third movement was a factor in deciding me to spend the night.

But our love affair had ended, leaving me with a few regrets, with memories good and bad, and with Craithe's last symphony, to which I listened in the long, lonely evenings with a masochistic pleasure.

Because I liked his last symphony so much, I tried his earlier works, too, but I couldn't like them: they seemed cold, monotonous, inhuman. I could hardly believe they'd been written by the same person. But, as I would readily admit, I knew nothing about music. That I should have set out to make a film about the Scottish composer Edward Craithe might seem unlikely, but the truth is that we don't always choose our subjects – sometimes they choose us.

After a stint as a researcher with the BBC I'd written a reasonably successful short series about the depiction of drug abuse and drug culture in art and literature down the centuries, and I was trying to figure out what came next. I'd pitched a couple of ideas

but hadn't managed to rouse the enthusiasm of anyone with money.

And then I got the letter from Maggie Price about Flora Abernethy.

Maggie is a social worker in Edinburgh who helped with my research into post-*Trainspotting* drug culture. We became friendly and kept in touch via e-mail. She was always sending me no-hoper ideas she thought would make brilliant TV, and so far my lack of enthusiasm had not put her off.

Her latest suggestion was for a programme about a composer called Flora Abernethy, who supposedly had never been properly valued because she was a woman (Maggie didn't realize that feminist rediscoveries were way past their sell-by date), and because she'd been mad at one time, but who might actually have been the real composer of Craithe's last symphony.

Edward Craithe had been Flora Abernethy's lover. The original score, from 1940 or so, was in her hand, and no drafts or notes for it had ever been found among Craithe's papers. And of course, as even I knew, it was very different from the style in which he had previously been working. The big mystery about Craithe, and the only fact which I knew about his life, was what had happened to him in 1940. He had disappeared then, and no trace of him had ever been found. Maggie suggested that Craithe's last symphony had actually been a collaboration between him and Flora Abernethy, but she referred me to an article published in *The Feminist Review* in 1984 which argued that it was Flora Abernethy's work alone, written after her abandonment by Craithe, and that it was the refusal by the establishment to accept this and take her seriously which had led both to her mental breakdown and to the effective end of her career.

"Of course, there's no way of proving authorship, but at least the issue could be raised. She's a lovely lady, very articulate, I'm sure she'd be great on TV. Her connection with Craithe could be the hook for a fascinating programme."

For once, I agreed with Maggie. I'd been looking for my next project, and now I'd found it. Music, history, a mystery, the hint of scandal: had Craithe been given credit for his girlfriend's work? Maybe she knew the truth behind his disappearance. From what Maggie said, the old lady was ready to talk; the time was ripe to solve the mystery of Edward Craithe.

Maggie thought there was no way of proving authorship, but I believed otherwise. I'd heard of a computer programme which could analyse a piece of music and generate more in the same style, and if computer programmes could be used to authenticate works believed to be by Shakespeare and other word-mongers, how much more easily would one deal with the more mathematical structures of music!

The London Library listed two biographies of Craithe, one from 1952, the other from 1976. I reserved them both. It seemed strange to me that there had been no new biography in 20 years. Weren't there others, like me, tempted to solve the mystery of Craithe's disappearance? Or had it been solved? How to go from ego-centric ("What a brilliant idea I've had!") to paranoid ("Everyone else in the world has known for years") in

five minutes. I got on my bike and went straight to the library before anyone else could steal my books.

The 1976 biography, by Mark R. Thomas, had a section of photographs, as well as footnotes. I looked at the pictures first. Craithe, in a studio shot from 1936, looked smooth and oiled, handsome as a matinee idol. Flora Abernethy had dreamy eyes but a determined jaw. I began to skim-read, with the 1952 biography, by A. D. Wallace, close at hand for the occasional contrast and comparison.

Edward Craithe had been born shortly before the first world war into a middle-class Edinburgh family. They were not especially musical, but there was a piano, and music lessons, for all the children, and when Edward showed an interest in composition it had been encouraged, and a tutor provided. By the age of 23 he was teaching music at a private school in the city and his first symphony had been performed, to encouraging reviews. He announced his engagement to an 18-year-old girl of good family, and then, scandalously, broke off the engagement a few months later, having fallen in love with another woman. This, of course, was Flora Abernethy, an "older woman" (she was 25) with no living relations, who played the violin in a chamber group, and supported herself by giving music lessons. Although they travelled together unchaperoned, and may have lived together, Flora always kept her own rented room, and they did not marry. Wallace hinted that a prior marriage had made it impossible for Flora legally to marry Edward, but Thomas had interviewed Flora Abernethy and quoted her "philosophical and moral objections" to marriage.

According to the earlier biography, Craithe had been lured into joining a strange cult by the gullible Flora, who was under the influence of its leader. According to Thomas there was no cult, only a Taoist monk called Hsiu Tang whom Flora and Edward had separately approached for tuition in traditional Chinese music. Along with musical instruction he had taught them his own esoteric branch of Taoism which was based on the ancient Chinese belief that everything was created out of music, and that it was possible to learn to hear this divine music through a specialized form of meditation. The details now could only be guessed at and supposed. Hsiu Tang had, like Craithe, vanished around 1940.

Both biographies ended with speculation on what had happened to Craithe. They were in agreement that after being called up he had deliberately deserted, under pressure from Flora, who was pregnant. Wallace believed that, after a period of hiding out, perhaps in Wales where Flora had suffered a miscarriage, Craithe had repented of his cowardice and gone to London to enlist under a false name. He had then become one of the many casualties of the war, dead in some foreign field, buried under an assumed name. Thomas went along as far as the flight to Wales and the miscarriage, but then, as Flora descended into madness, he believed that Craithe had left (perhaps unaware of how ill Flora had become, assuming she would follow later) and gone by boat to Ireland. There he had stayed in a cottage on the west coast, living like a hermit and continuing to compose music, for several years until his death, while still a young man, from what might have been TB. Much hand-written sheet music had apparently been



found in the cottage after his death, and although most of it had been destroyed, the author claimed to be in possession of a few remaining scraps in which he had recognized Craithe's distinctive style.

More for the computer to analyse, I thought happily. I was always happier when I found a way of using the computer. I don't know how I'd live without it.

Back at home, I trawled the Internet in search of connections, posting requests here and there. If there was anyone writing a biography or otherwise researching Craithe, I wanted to know about it.

I arranged a meeting with my TV people and came away with seed money – well, with a contract and the promise of seed money. The zeitgeist was with me: Scottish composers were “in,” and if I could, as I'd hinted, solve the mystery of Craithe's disappearance – big time. If not, well, I could still have an effective, artistic little biography to appeal to a smaller audience.

I tracked down the biographer, Mark Thomas, and took him out to lunch. He agreed to give me copies of the music that had been found in the cottage in Ireland, although he warned me that they were only scraps, not enough to prove anything.

“They might be enough for the computer,” I said. “They can extrapolate from very little, and make comparisons with the body of work.”

He scowled. “I can do that, too. I could continue what there is on certain lines... but that's not to say that what I came up with would be what Craithe wrote. I think you have the wrong idea about how music works: yes, it may be mathematical, but that's not to say it is utterly predictable. Set a problem within certain limits, take any five musicians and no two of them would reach the same conclusion.”

“I don't know anything about music,” I said. “But I do know computers, and there are programmes which can write music.”

He snorted. “Depends what you call music.”

“That's not really the point. It's analysis, not composition, I'm interested in. Computers are great for detective work. What made you decide the music you found was Craithe's? There must have been some basic principles...”

“To be perfectly honest, I was following a hunch, operating on instinct as much as anything. There's no proof.” He looked straight into my eyes, and I suddenly twigged that he'd made the whole thing up to sell his biography.

“Wasn't there any music found in the cottage?”

“Yes, of course! You don't think I made that up? Look, I don't have proof, these things *can't* be proved, whatever you may think, but using my knowledge of musicology and of Craithe I made some perfectly legitimate speculations... Of course the music was there! But most of it was burnt by the time I got my hands on it. There were really only scraps left.”

“Could I see them?”

“I've brought you photocopies. You can use them however you like.”

“Thank you. There's something you might not have thought of doing, but I'd like to get it analysed not only in comparison with Craithe's other works, but also to compare his last symphony with Flora Abernethy's own

compositions.”

“Oh, Lord,” he said. “You're not intending to argue – not seriously – that loony feminist's theory?”

“Why not? The only manuscript is in her hand, and you must admit that it is completely unlike his earlier works.”

“It's also wholly unlike anything *she* ever wrote,” he said definitely. “There absolutely no connection between any of her known works and Craithe's final opus. So if the lack of connection between the last symphony and his earlier work is meant to be proof that he couldn't have written it – why doesn't it matter in her case? I'll tell you why: the woman who wrote that article had no notion. She was simply casting about, rather desperately, in search of some new victim-heroine to prove her thesis that women's work is always stolen by men. She had absolutely no evidence. And for all the mad things Flora Abernethy said, she never claimed that Craithe's work was hers.”

“You did ask her?”

He looked at me without replying. I felt I was trespassing, but I didn't let it stop me. “I did think it strange that although you interviewed her you didn't give her explanation of what happened to him. Surely she had some idea?”

“She was quite mad. It would not have been kind, nor served any purpose, to have published her rambling, mystical notions. As far as she was concerned, Edward Craithe simply vanished. He ‘left this plane,’ I believe was how she put it. I doubt she'll be able to tell you anything useful. If you have any idea of putting her on television... well, I hope you'll think very hard about it.”

“I don't intend to exploit her,” I said, annoyed. “Maggie – her social worker – doesn't think she's crazy.”

He shrugged. “Even if she's completely sane now she's unlikely to be able to remember the truth of what happened when she was mad. I suspect that she simply doesn't know what happened to Craithe, whether he told her where he was going, expecting her to follow, or if he simply abandoned her, unable to cope with her grief and her madness any more than he could cope with the war.”

I wondered what Flora Abernethy had told this man but I didn't press him; I preferred to let her speak for herself.

Flora Abernethy lived in a basement flat on a rundown street near the centre of Edinburgh. She was a frail-looking, white-haired woman who spoke clearly but moved very slowly. The dimly-lit front room was bone-chillingly cold although it was only October; she switched on an electric heater for my comfort. Even had Maggie not warned me I would have recognized by this how she lived, pinching and scrimping and doing without, putting on another ancient woolly rather than add to her electricity bill. I wished I'd brought more than a box of biscuits, but Maggie had insisted that Miss Abernethy would be mortally insulted by a food-basket. “Too much like charity. She'd be mortified.” If my programme got made, then later there would be money she'd be able to accept: fees for her time and help, fees for the use of her music.

When we were settled, finally, with our cups of tea and the box of biscuits open on a table between us, I

asked if she minded my tape recording our interview.

"I don't mind at all, dear. In fact I prefer it. This way there can be no confusion about what I've said. Because you're bound to question it. But I don't mind that, as long as you hear it. It won't hurt me if people think I'm mad. What matters to me is that the truth should be told."

"Yes... what truth is that?"

"About Edward Craithe. What happened to him. Isn't that what you've come to ask?"

My heart lurched. I had meant to lead up to this more gently, but... "You know what happened to him?"

"Of course I do. I told the other one, the one who was writing a book, but he never put in what I said. He thought I was mad, you see, and of course I was, driven mad with grief, but that's not to say that it wasn't true. I know what happened. I know what I did.

"I've always been able to hear the music in people. It was a gift I was born with, although as I grew up I realized that other people couldn't hear what I could, and that it would be better for me if I didn't talk about it. One day, after I was grown, I attended a lecture on non-Western musical traditions, and the lecturer mentioned in passing the ancient Chinese belief that all of creation was moulded according to the music performed inside it. And suddenly I understood: this was how I perceived the world. After that I was wild to learn whatever I could about Chinese music and religion.

"I didn't get much farther until I came across Mr Tang. He could hear the music in people, too, and so we recognized each other. Unlike me, he came from a culture, a tradition, which accepted his gift, and made sense of it. He agreed to teach me what he knew.

"One day when I was going to visit Mr Tang I met Edward coming out. We knew each other already, for we belonged to the same musical world. At first I was wild with excitement, imagining that he had the gift too, but I soon learned I was wrong. He had approached Mr Tang as an interested outsider. He did not 'hear' people as I did, yet he was drawn to the idea of a universal music, of music as the shaping principal of all creation... I think really it was the religious impulse in him which was nearly strangled by his dour, Free Church upbringing, and that he was looking for God in music as the only alternative he could imagine to worship. It might have remained an intellectual interest for him, he might have drifted away as easily as he had drifted into the orbit of Mr Tang – but he fell in love with me, and began learning to listen."

"I thought you said you were born with the ability?"

"Och, aye, it was a gift I had; that's not saying it can't be learned as well. I wouldn't have known how to teach something that came so naturally to me, but Mr Tang taught it as a form of meditation: gradually the student would learn to focus his attention to hear the universal music. Edward began to catch snatches of it here and there, he was learning. What kept him at it, he often told me, was the desire he had to hear my song." She smiled sadly. "But the war came, and everything changed.

"Edward was called up. Mr Tang disappeared. Everything was confusion and flight. And then I found that I was pregnant. And I... I lost my reason.

"I should have been glad of Edward's child – we had hoped for a child someday. But somehow, with the war... I became convinced that I would lose Edward,

and that without him I could not survive. I felt I must keep him with me at any cost. And so, on his last day with me before he was to be shipped out, I asked him to sit and meditate with me. I listened to the song of his soul – which of course I had heard many times before – with the closest attention I had ever paid. My senses were sharpened by fear. I knew I had to hear him exactly as he was – I did not dare make any mistakes – because this time I was going to write down what I heard.

"I did that. And as I made the final notation, and raised my eyes to look at him across the room – he was gone. Physically, bodily gone. The only thing left of him was the music I had just copied down which still, to my ears, hung as a faint echo in the air.

"At first I was elated. I had captured my dear Edward in music and now nothing could harm him, nothing, not the war, not death, or any person, could take him away from me. I only gradually realized that by saving Edward in this form I had lost him physically. I had translated him out of his human body into the pure music of his soul and I had no way of getting him back.

"Of course I tried playing the music. And when that had no tangible result I told myself, well, that was because I had only one instrument, and he would require a symphony. I couldn't command an orchestra to play at my whim, of course, so that would have to wait. In the meantime, I tried to find Mr Tang. If he couldn't call Edward back, I hoped he would allow me to join my love, by translating me. You see, there was no one else I knew of in the world with the ability to hear my music and write it down. Possibly Edward might have learned to do it, or if Mr Tang had taught someone else... I had the address of a pupil of his, in Wales, but when I made my way out there, he too was gone, called up. His family took pity on me, an abandoned pregnant woman, and let me stay with them. I was delivered of a dead child at seven months and spent the rest of the war in a mental institution.

"After the war, when my translation – Craithe's last symphony, they called it – was performed and still Edward did not return... then I was forced to recognize the full enormity of what I had done. By writing down his music I had destroyed his life, killed him just as thoroughly as if I had fired a bullet into his heart.

"If Edward had died in the war his music would have joined with the universe, his particular song would not be fixed but would disperse and be reformed, like the atoms of his physical body, into new life. What I did gave him one type of immortality, by freezing him into one single symphony, as he was at 28, but it denied him the chance of rebirth, of the eternal round of life that everyone else has. Well, one must learn to live with one's mistakes. I survived a suicide attempt and many years of lonely madness. I must go on to the end, however it comes to me, knowing I cannot make amends for my terrible mistake."

She looked sad and tired and very old as she fell silent. Full of sympathy, I said, "But Edward Craithe *is* immortal, because of the final symphony. The only immortality anyone can hope for is to be remembered, and for their work to still be known. That's what I believe, anyway."

"And so you believe me?"



Listening to her story, I'd suspended my disbelief. Now, put on the spot, I dithered. "Well, I – I've never heard anything like that before. It's an interesting idea. You know they say that we, that all living things are composed of information, and that theoretically it should be possible to transcribe all that information and store it in a computer. That would be a sort of immortality, because if it could be stored and retrieved later... but I'd never heard it suggested that if you did transcribe all the information of a life into a computer that you'd be *transferring* the life from one form to another; I'd always assumed it would be a duplication, that the person would go on living in his or her body even after all the essential information was stored on a computer... maybe it's a paradox? Nobody can be in two places at once?"

She was looking much perkier; almost alarmingly bright. "Souls in computers! Yes... I saw something on the television about that, but do you know, I never made the connection? But we are all information, and music is another form of information which can be stored and reproduced... Do you know much about computers, my dear? Do you have access to one?"

"Yes, I do." I was taken aback by her informed interest, and ashamed of myself for assuming that because she was old she was also ignorant of modern ideas. "In fact, I'd thought of using one to research this film. I had hoped to get some samples of your own compositions and compare them with Craithe's earlier works, and with the final symphony—" I stopped in embarrassment, but I needn't have worried. She didn't care what I believed about who had written the final symphony; she was pursuing her own train of thought.

"There are computers – sorry, programmes – which can write music, yes? Could it, if you entered the final symphony, continue it?"

"But it's finished already. It's a complete work."

"Yes, that was my mistake. I finished Edward by finishing the symphony instead of leaving it open. He wasn't dead, that shouldn't have been his ending, he should have gone on living. And if he had, his life's music would have taken a different form, to a different conclusion. Could it, this computer programme, could it change the course of the music?"

"Well, yes." I had the uneasy feeling that I was encouraging her in her madness, but what else could I do? "I don't see why not, if you fed in a few simple rules, whatever knowledge a human composer would have to have, and then you let it follow those rules. I mean, I don't know anything about music, but I should think it would be like structuring a programme to create anything."

"Please..." She leaned forward in her chair, her little bird-claw hands clutching at the arms, her bright eyes full of hope and fixed on me. "Would you let me try it?"

"Well... yes. Why not?"

I'd realized by then that even if my film did get made I wasn't going to be able to have Flora on screen, revealing her madness to the world. I may have already suspected my project was on the skids, but I had started something I had to see through.

Maggie had offered me an open-ended invitation to

stay with her while I was in Edinburgh, and I'd thought I might as well spend a week or two up north doing some research, so I'd brought along my lap-top and the as yet untried musical software. I took it with me when I called on Flora Abernethy at her flat the following day.

Flora was a quick study. Despite her age and the fact that she'd never had any hands-on experience of a computer before she adapted very quickly. I had imagined that I would be the operator, doing things at her suggestion, but her knowledge of music was something I could not match; it was less frustrating for both of us if she worked directly on to the computer. She took to mouse and screen as to another musical instrument. Observing her as she entered Craithe's last symphony – commanding the on-screen virtual orchestra to play it – I recognized that she was a woman of genius, and I was gripped by a feeling of profound sorrow for the waste of what should have been a rich, creative life.

"Now," she said, raising her hands above the mousepad. "Now, the music is in the machine. Edward, as he was, in 1940, is in there, like a phonograph of his soul." She turned to look at me, standing behind her. "Now, I want to let the music out of the fixed form, the symphony, I trapped it in, and let him live again. How can you help me?"

In the games – if that's the right word – of artificial life I knew about, there were a few established rules which determined when the units could move, and in which direction, when reproduce, and so on. Flora was working with music, but she didn't want to create a song or a symphony – she wanted something open-ended, for the music of Craithe's last symphony to grow, like the living being she believed it was. I told her she needed different software – or I needed to modify the programme we had to allow her individual notes the chance to evolve, to emerge in some system that formed naturally according to the rules of life, rather than being imposed by the rules of musical composition.

"How long would this take?"

"I should be able to do it tonight."

"And bring it back to me tomorrow?"

I promised I would, and then I went back to Maggie's flat and spent the evening modifying the music programme so it would do what Flora wanted. It took very little time to set it up the next morning at Flora's place: once the notes had been fed in we just let it run, the music playing softly, strangely from the speakers as the visual form of the notes ran in shifting patterns on the screen. From time to time I thought I recognized snatches of Craithe's final symphony, but just as often the sounds which emerged were not music at all.

While that went on, I was able to continue my interview with Flora. I had no idea how or if I would ever use the material, since the film I'd envisioned seemed unlikely ever to be made, but I was still going through the motions. And besides, I was curious about her.

So she told me about her sad, lonely childhood: her father was killed in the Great War, and she'd lost her mother and baby sister to the influenza not long after that. She'd been taken in and raised by her only relation, a spinster aunt, who had always been kind to her. This aunt had died when Flora was 17, leaving her alone in the world. But she'd won a music scholarship and had

a small inheritance which kept her going. Music was always the constant in her life and she had, of necessity, lived for it. She had won an award for composition while a student, and she had sold a few songs. Her alliance with Edward had brought her more recognition, giving her an entrée into more exalted musical circles. Before the war, she had been commissioned to write a chamber piece which had been performed and broadcast.

I was thrilled by these revelations, and pleased that Edward had helped rather than hindered her career. "I'd love to hear some of your work," I said.

She shook her head dismissively. "I don't have it any more."

"You lost it? All of it?"

"You must remember what my life was... during and after the war. From pillar to post. Locked up, out of control. No home of my own. It's not as if I decided to destroy my music, or to save it. I simply... lost track. I have no idea what happened to it, to any of it... And, really, it's not important."

"But it is! It was your work, and it was good enough to be performed—" I had a sudden inspiration. "The BBC archives? They might have a recording."

She shrugged. "They might. I can't help you there. I can't even remember the date. I think it was some time in 1938."

"What about after the war, after you were better. Did you go back to writing music?"

"Never. I gave it up. Renounced it, after what I'd done to Edward. It seemed too much like playing God."

"And this doesn't?" I gestured at my lap-top, at the little speakers from which the almost-not-quite music continued to issue.

"Oh, no." She smiled. "That couldn't be more different. I copied Edward into the machine so he could be free again. I'm not trying to impose my will and end his life or shape it; that's no more playing God than it was when Edward and I made love knowing that a new life might result. Knowing that it *might*, mind, not knowing that it would or, if it did, what sort of life it might be."

No way was this woman insane. "What do you think will happen now that you've put Edward's music into the programme?"

She began to shake her head. "I don't know. This might—" And then she froze. I saw tears in her eyes. She turned eagerly towards the computer.

The music had changed. It was real music now, not simply the random sequence of sounds we had been getting, and it was something new. It was very much like Craithe's final symphony, it was similar to it, familiar, yet it was not the same.

"Edward," said Flora. "Oh, it *is* Edward, it *is*. Oh, thank God — I didn't destroy you!"

She was talking to the music. Not insane? My heart sank. She went on talking to it, and I was writhing in embarrassment. "Oh, my darling, have you forgiven me? Truly, never? You were never sorry. Oh, my love! You know what I want you to do?" I couldn't go on listening. Awkwardly, I said, "I'll let you, um.... I'll go and make us some lunch."

I'd brought a bag of groceries in the previous day, knowing she could not object to a shared lunch. I'd bought some ready-made meals but also some fresh vegetables and other things; I decided to keep myself out of the

way by making soup, even though I'd lost my appetite.

I was mentally waving everything goodbye. Not just the idea of solving the mystery of Edward Craithe's disappearance, but the idea of a film at all. I couldn't exploit a poor old madwoman. Goodbye money, goodbye work, and goodbye computer as well. Because there was no way she could afford to buy one for herself, and now that she believed her darling, long lost Edward was resident in the software, I couldn't be so cruel as to deprive Flora of her only comfort in life. Maybe she wouldn't want it; maybe it would be enough for her to have said goodbye to him properly and believe that he was now an immortal piece of music forever evolving in the depths of cyberspace... but I wasn't banking on it. If I'd just been reunited with my long-lost lover after years and years of missing him I'd certainly want to stay with him forever and ever amen.

Before I got too heavily invested in the soup, I thought I'd better ask Flora if there was anything she didn't like or couldn't eat. I took a few deep, meant-to-be-calming breaths and went back into the sitting room.

The first thing I noticed was that the music had changed. It was no longer anything at all like Craithe's last symphony. It was completely different in style, tone, everything. I was sure I had never heard it before, and yet there was also something faintly, teasingly familiar about it. I loved it at once. It was beautiful, strong, emotional — "What is it?" I asked, and only then did I realize that I was alone in the room.

Flora had probably gone to the loo; I sat down to wait, entranced by the music.

I must have sat there for 20 minutes or more, rapt in the music, before it changed to something I found less compelling and at about the same time Flora's continued absence started to worry me. I went to check on her — but she wasn't in the loo, or in her tiny nun-like bedroom, or in the kitchen. Back in the sitting room again I went over to look at the computer screen. I think on some level I already knew where she was.

Now, instead of the musical notation which went with the sound, there were words I could read on the screen, words which were meant for me. As I read them the music from the speakers changed again, this time to something which not simply seemed but actually was very familiar. It was a song everybody knows; it was "Auld Lang Syne." And blinking at me from the screen, in time to the music, was my final message from Flora:

*Thank you, thank you, thank you  
Until we meet again.*

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**Lisa Tuttle's** most recent novel was *The Pillow Friend* (reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 114). Her all-too-infrequent earlier stories for this magazine include "Memories of the Body" (issue 22), "Lizard Lust" (issue 39) and "To Be of Use" (issue 42). A Texan by birth, she lives in Scotland with her husband and child.



# A Picture of Gene Wolfe

Elizabeth Counihan

"Though neither the most popular nor the most influential author in the sf field, GW is today quite possibly the most important." – *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (1993)

They do say that there is no such thing as a piece of unbiased reporting, so I had better admit at the outset that I have been a fan of Gene Wolfe's books for many years. This article is a "Picture" rather than "Interview" because it results from two interviews, one by mail the other face-to-face, as well as a longish correspondence.

I had originally contacted Gene Wolfe when he had been booked to appear at a British sf convention some years back. I had hoped to interview him at that time for another magazine. Although, as it turned out, he was unable to come to Britain that year, he agreed to answer a postal questionnaire instead. The interview was conducted by mail, bit by bit, one or two questions answered at a time. There are certain disadvantages to this method; for one thing you can't see your quarry's reactions to questions. On the other hand the questions and answers are more structured and thought-out than in a face-to-face interview.

Gene Wolfe's stories are famously mysterious and complicated, with a tendency to wilful obscurity which delights some (me included) and infuriates others. Would his answers be incomprehensible, sibylline or just quirky? The replies came back, chatty, American and perfectly straightforward. The only typically Wolfian peculiarity was that he answered my questions backwards, the last one first. Reversal and paradox are among his favourite storytelling techniques – Severian clinging to the side of a mountain but afraid of falling into the sky; Dorcas apparently dragging Severian from the swamp when in fact it was he who, unknowing, rescued her. Just

about any of his stories will furnish another such example.

When I had an opportunity to travel to the USA he agreed to a follow-up interview, this time for *Interzone*. This report will contain material from both interviews, giving me the opportunity of asking a different set of questions, following up on some of the old ones and getting an impression of the man himself.

The Wolfes live in a small town about 30 miles from Chicago. They have a bungalow-style house on what we might call a private estate. When I arrived it was the middle of January and dark. Dire warnings in previous letters had indicated that Chicago in winter could be colder than Antarctica. Perhaps they were lucky this year. There was a little snow beside the road but it all looked quite jolly. Christmas lights were still whirling and twinkling outside several of the houses in their street, including the Wolfe's place – Americans don't appear to have superstitions about Twelfth Night. The house has a wooden floor and smells of wood. I think it is probably made of wood too. There are some books in the sitting room, but not as many as I had expected and a number of original paintings associated with *The Book of the New Sun* (1980-83) as well as some religious pictures. The four children have grown up and left home, so that apart from a large, friendly dog, just Gene and his wife, Rosemary, live there now.

The man himself looks nothing like those publicity photos on the backs of some of his books – cold-eyed and ferociously intellectual, the sort of person you would least like to have interview you for a job. In fact he has a friendly face, crinkled, doggy eyes

behind thick glasses and a walrus moustache which his wife does not approve of. He laughs a lot; in fact he giggles. He asked if I liked Benny Hill. He thought Benny Hill was brilliant. I explained that Benny Hill was considered too politically incorrect for British audiences, all that chasing girls around park benches. He just laughed.

He is amusing to talk to. You wouldn't think so from the books, perhaps unfairly, because a sense of humour is not among the attributes of Severian, his most famous character. But Gene Wolfe telling you how, on his last visit to England, he circled Bath in a hired car, desperately seeking a hotel and a next meal and failing to cope with one-way systems, gear sticks, roundabouts, driving on the left and taking directions from the natives, is genially and self-deprecatingly funny. Or the time he and another American writer (I can't remember who) were attempting to answer questions about sf on a British radio phone-in programme. The difficulty was that although both were able to decipher your standard South-of-England accent, the assorted Cockneys, Geordies and Brummies on the line could have been speaking Chinese as far as they were concerned. The answer was to pass the buck. "I think that's one for you, Gene"... "Oh, but you know more about that than I do," etc.

Perhaps Americans are even worse with languages than we are. Take the story Gene Wolfe tells about a



lecture he attended given by the famously multilingual Jorge Luis Borges. As a gesture of politeness to their guest the organizers had laid on a Spanish speaker to translate questions from the audience. The cumbersome and unnecessary process began but then, eager to show off their faltering Spanish, onlookers began to question him in his own language. Their pronunciation defeated even Borges, and at last the Spanish translator came into his own, translating American-style Spanish back into English so that the Great Man could understand the questions, which of course he then answered in English.

You might ask what all this personal, gossipy stuff has to do with the work of such a high-minded writer as Wolfe, but his books are so imbued with his own experiences, influences and beliefs that it seems to me that everything about him is relevant to understanding what makes this particular writer tick. To give an example from one of the less serious novels, *Pandora*, by Holly Hollander (1990): the small-town setting is called "Barton" in the book but is actually Gene Wolfe's own home town of Barrington. He showed me the big houses where the rich people of Barrington live. In the story it's called "Barton Heights" and is home to poor Holly and her unpleasant parents. And for a loftier example – Chicago itself, a stunningly beautiful city of towers of every possible shape and size and angle and, I swear, every one poised to take off into the sky at a moment's notice.

Gene Wolfe was born in 1931, an only child. The family have been American for several generations, but are "Black Dutch" in origin, and Swiss on the paternal grandmother's side. His mother's family were originally Scots and Welsh. He was brought up in Texas and for part of his childhood, in Logan, Ohio, the setting of *Peace* (1975), one of the earlier novels. He still has enough of a Southern accent to be discernible even to a non-American. His childhood was "happy in that I had a wonderful father and mother, unhappy in most other circumstances. I was always very much an outsider, was sick a great deal and so on." This may partially explain the number of sad, neglected children to be found in such stories as "The Eyeflash Miracles" and "The Death of Doctor Island" and many others.

His parents did not tell him stories, although his mother read to him "for thousands of hours, often the books that she was reading herself." In fact there are no other writers in his family, except for a possible connection to Thomas Wolfe. But as a youth, Gene did notice in his mother and one of his cousins, the artistic

traits which he recognized in himself. His eldest son is an artist, one daughter used to be an actress and another daughter "is threatening to write a book."

Gene himself was a voracious reader as a child, and it seems that he still is – unlike other writers I have spoken to, many of whom seem to have given up reading fiction when they became adults. The local library was an important place for him both in real life as a child, and in his fiction – think of Master Ultan's endless library in *The Shadow of the Torturer* (1980) or the huge, domed library in *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* (1972) with its book-lined spiral walkways designed to accommodate wheeled robots.

"I read the Oz books, Lewis Carroll, Mark Twain, a perfectly awful boy's adventure novel called *The G-Man's Son* that I thought was wonderful, all the Kipling I could lay my hands on, an abbreviated *Moby Dick*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, comic books and pulp magazines: *Weird Tales*, *Astounding*, *Planet Stories*, *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, *Startling Stories*, *Amazing* and my special favourite, *Famous Fantastic Mysteries*."

So, where were the books he read now, the books which were not on view in the sitting room of his house? To find them you have to go down into the cellar, into what I have to call a Wolfe's den. There is a utility room containing the kind of vast American washing machines that could launder for an army, and next to it a big study containing a desk, goldfish tanks (empty, or maybe the fish were hiding), a bed in case Gene wants to work at night, and books floor to ceiling. The desk is covered with papers, but just about visible is the old-fashioned electric typewriter he uses. No word processor. ("I don't believe people who tell me that having a computer would improve my writing. Shakespeare did all right with a quill pen...") There is a workroom next-door with benches and carpentry tools and more books all piled up. It looks like the more chaotic kind of second-hand book shop.

I asked which modern writers he admired. His original written answer was: "Asimov, Bradbury, Lafferty, Pohl, Rebecca Ore, John Crowley, Joyce Carol Oates, Ellen Kushner, Jonathan Carroll, Lucius Shepherd, Jack Vance, Jack Womack, Brian Aldiss, Tom Disch, Ron Goulart, Ballard, Emma Bull, Jane Yolen, Ursula K. Le Guin, Algis Budrys, Ben Bova, Steve Brust and Tim Powers. Those are off the top of my head." In conversation he enthused about the comic (and notoriously right-wing) travel writer P. J. O'Rourke and also Mikhail Bulgakov's strange Faustian

tale *The Master and Margarita*.

Although in a previous *Interzone* interview (issue 17) he claimed that cinema was "a junk medium" he actually seems to enjoy both film and theatre a great deal – roaring with laughter at a satirical (and very funny) review that he and Rosemary took me to in Chicago and talking enthusiastically about movies he liked... delighted that someone else had seen and enjoyed that long-ago children's film *The 5,000 Fingers of Dr. T*, insisting on recounting the stories of some of his favourites and, infuriatingly, giving the endings away. He once wrote a short piece called "Robot's Story" about an android programmed to tell stories. In an afterword he claimed that he himself was Robot. He was, and still is a compulsive teller of tales.

"Yes, I'm still compelled to write, which doesn't mean I don't enjoy it; at times I enjoy it very much."

Gene Wolfe did not start out to be a writer. After serving as a soldier in the Korean War he trained as an engineer and worked for a large firm for several years. He seems to have chosen this particular career path for mainly practical reasons – engineering held out the possibility of making a reasonable living. "But," he said, "although it may not be apparent from the books, I am a tinkerer who loves to find out how things work." Apparently he had once, in true little-boy fashion, tinkered the family's front door lock to destruction.

His first published story was "The Dead Man," a ghost story set in India and published by a men's magazine called *Sir*. A number of short stories followed and then the first novel, *Operation Ares* (1970), in which a typically Wolfian run-down America of the future is invaded by "Martians" – and, perhaps initiating Wolfe's delight in being contrary, the Martians are the good guys. Then came *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*, fiendishly clever and still, surely, one of his best "novels"; except that it isn't really a novel but three novellas whose complicated connections are not immediately obvious.

It was at about this time that he realized he was never going to get to the top in engineering. Furthermore his wife was unhappy and wanted to move nearer home. He saw a newspaper advertisement for an editor for *Plant Engineering* magazine. He applied, got the job (partly on the strength of his published stories) and worked there happily for many years as a senior editor, only resigning with the success of *The Book of the New Sun*. Since then he has been a full-time writer.

"We're Catholics," he said quite soon after we met, and unnecessarily. "I know," I said. "You are famous for it. Didn't you know that?"

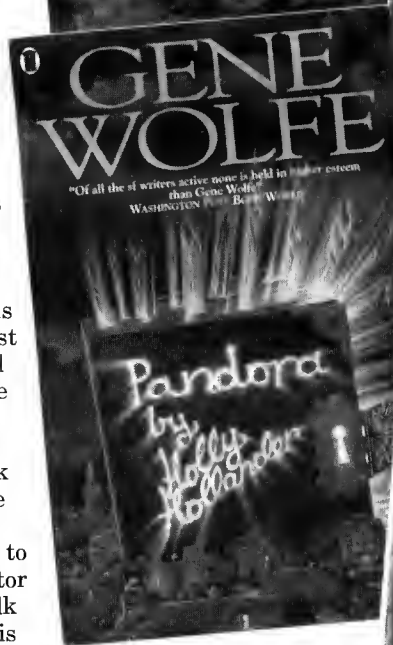
"No, I didn't," he said. Didn't know? That seemed odd. Neither did he know that Terry Pratchett's *Small Gods* includes a side-swipe parody of Severian at his most devout. (He does now – I got him a copy.)

We discussed religion. Rosemary, his wife is a cradle Catholic (i.e. born to it) but Gene converted as an adult. Converts are, notoriously, extra keen. How much did he feel that religion affected his writing? He explained that his faith pervades all his life and work. The two most overtly religious works are *The Book of the New Sun* and the more recent *Book of the Long Sun* (1993-96). Severian, the protagonist of the *New Sun* tetralogy, is reared as an apprentice to the torturers but is gradually converted from torturer to healer and even saviour by the end of the story. He works miracles. In the sequel to the tetralogy, *The Urth of the New Sun* (1987), Severian becomes godlike, and if not immortal at least indestructible. Not only is he the New Sun but also the Conciliator, a Christ-like figure from the past who had supposedly reconciled Man and God. But was Severian, like Christ, actually meant to be God?

"No, of course he isn't God. But he is in the process of becoming a saint. That is what all Christians are supposed to do." Gene went on to talk about *The Book of the Long Sun* (also a four-volume work). In this story a virginal young priest called Patera Silk is visited by a god – the Outsider, the one who does not belong among the assorted deities who are worshipped by Silk and his flock. In the middle of a game of basketball (which, incidentally, seems to be Wolfe's favourite spectator sport) the god speaks to Silk and he is "enlightened." It is made fairly clear to the reader that the Outsider is not just any god but the real thing – God Himself. We soon learn that the other gods are a pretty disreputable lot and only present courtesy of a defective computer system.

"In the *New Sun* I wrote about a man reared in an evil profession. In this book I wanted to write about a good man serving a bad religion. I wanted to show that Good can be more frightening than Evil. The bad man might say to you 'I like the look of you, I'm going to eat you up' but the good man might say 'You are evil and I am going to stamp you out.'"

Certain ideas recur with almost obsessional regularity in Gene Wolfe's work. Many of these themes are common to other serious writers: mortality, ageing, human love and cruelty, for example. But his own special fascination appears to be with memory. So many of his characters have abnormal memories: whether Severian, plagued by total recall, Latro (from *Soldier of the Mist* [1986]), who can't remember anything for more than a day, Alden Dennis Weir (from *Peace*) who, being dead, has difficulty in remembering his life coherently, and many more. Why?



"I can only guess. I was an only child, and I loved and was loved by both my parents. People like me end up as the only survivors of small commonwealths more obscure than Atlantis. Once there was a little house on Vassar Street, the home of a short and very bald man with big shoulders whom everybody liked, and a beautiful woman from a very Faulkneresque North

Carolina family, a fat black-and-white spaniel bitch and one small boy; and no one but me is left to tell you. I will be accused of sentimentality for saying all that, I realize. But you asked."

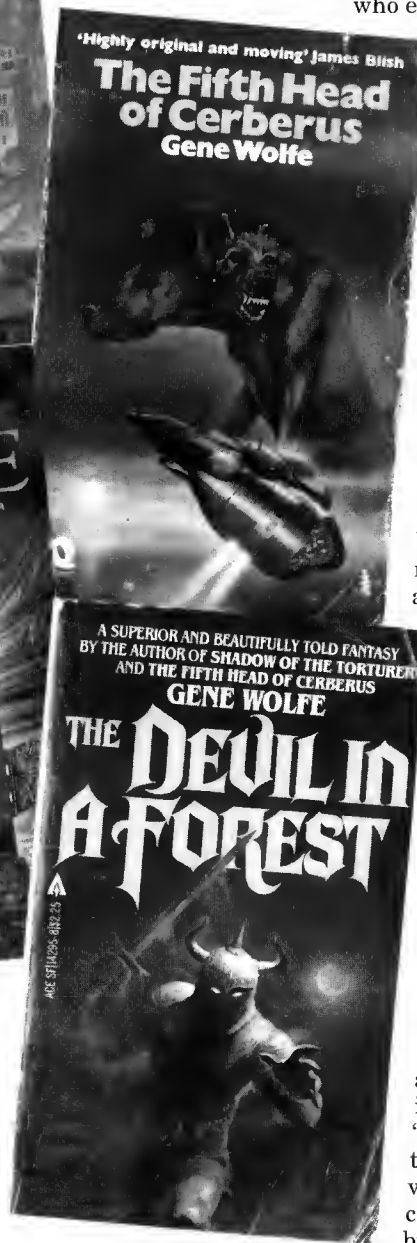
Another theme common to many of the stories is the condition of the USA. On the whole, especially in the older stories, the view is a pessimistic one. Wolfe's America of the near future is to be seen as in a state of terminal decay. The Government is usually brutal and incompetent, as in *Operation Ares* or "The Eyeflash Miracles." In "Seven American Nights" the nation has completely disintegrated and its people are dying. Dangerous, half-human derelicts haunt the streets. The reader is shown a doomed, forgotten wasteland through the eyes of a rich tourist from Persia

who encounters a new and ever more horrific wonder on each of the seven nights of the title.

In my first interview I asked Gene Wolfe if he thought things were getting better or worse in his country. His answer then was: "Better, mostly because the West won the Cold War." I did not repeat the question directly this time, but we did touch briefly on politics. He feels that the anti-Christian lobby in the USA is too strong and he resents "affirmative action" and considers

that some women's rights issues are too strongly represented. But he favours some form of national health service. He seems to regard all politicians as crooks but votes for the Republicans as being, in his opinion, the less dishonest of the two parties.

Anyone familiar with the books will be aware of a distinctive central character who appears in various forms in nearly all of them, the "Gene Wolfe hero." He tends to be a stoical individual, brave both physically and morally, clever but not cunning, not very good at expressing his feelings. He is often a soldier, or at least engaged in conflict and therefore nearly always gets injured, sometimes with permanent results. Having a professional interest in this, I had noticed that the author's knowl-





edge of anatomy and surgery was pretty accurate (unlike many other writers of tales involving body parts). As he had been a soldier himself in Korea, I wondered whether he had had direct experience of wounds.

"I wasn't an aid man, if that's what you mean. I was taught some first aid as all soldiers are. While on Pork Chop Hill, I opened my thumb on a C-ration can."

One, to me, particularly impressive episode occurs in *Soldier of Arete* (1989) when the hero, Latro, contemplates suicide. One of his companions points out that the most likely time for such an attempt to be made is when the sufferer is beginning to feel better and that he must therefore be watched even more closely during recovery than when he was too hopeless even to try to end his life. How did Gene Wolfe know that?

"I'm sure I read it somewhere. When I was about 40 and getting deeply dissatisfied with mechanical engineering, I wanted to become a clinical psychologist. I took several courses in abnormal psychology but dropped the idea when I came to realize how little a psychologist can do to help the patients most in need of help."

The earlier Gene Wolfe hero had a dark, somewhat sadistic side to his nature; the obvious example is the torturer Severian, but the unnamed boy (Number Five) from *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* has similar characteristics. In recent years the hero, although by no means a "new man," has developed a distinctly pleasanter aspect, starting with the amnesiac Greek warrior Latro in the two "Soldier" novels, through Mr Green, the inoffensive if slightly potty Ordinary Little Man in *There Are Doors* (1988) and now culminating in the down-right-saintly Patera Silk from the *Long Sun* tetralogy. They've even changed colour, Severian being dark-haired and Silk blond. Why had Wolfe altered the personality of his central character?

"I think I exhausted the possibilities of that sort of man – for me, I mean, and for the present – with *The Book of the New Sun*. You might easily have included Madame Serpentina as a female cognate." (She is the sexy witch from *Free Live Free* [1984].)

Was he worried by the darker side of his writing – the interest in, if not the direct depiction of, cruelty and torture? He observed that everyone has a dark side to their nature, but did not elaborate.

When, for the original interview, I received the written answer to my query about Wolfe's female characters, I had the distinct impression he had been asked the same thing before and had disagreed with the question: Most of your female charac-

ters are goddesses or bitches, often both. I can't honestly remember one who was really human, who could be wounded as your male characters so often are. The two women in *Castle-view* (1990) come nearest. Do you think it likely we might meet a sympathetic woman in one of your "serious" novels? It would be wonderful if you could do a Dickens and progress from soppy Dora to spirited Bella.

"Yeah. Leacock talked about Dickens the way you're talking about me; I didn't agree with him, either. I've written women protagonists: Sonya in 'Sonya, Crane, Wesselman, and Kittee' and Daisy McKane in 'Looking Glass Castle'; most recently Holly in *Pandora*, by Holly Hollander. As for bitches and goddesses, what about Thecla and Dorcas in *The Shadow of the Torturer*? Candy in *Free Live Free*? Fanny in *There Are Doors*? Aunt Olivia in *Peace*?"

Holly Hollander, yes, definitely a real person, but Thecla and Dorcas? Hmmm. Hyacinth, the naughty-but-nice girl from *Nightside the Long Sun* (1993) certainly looks promising.

Back to some of the earlier novels... *Peace* is sometimes marketed as mainstream literature and won a literary prize. It is seen from the viewpoint of an old man, Alden Dennis Weir, who recounts his life in a series of apparently muddled flashbacks. As usual with Gene Wolfe's work the book contains a number of fairy tales and weird, almost hallucinatory episodes. What was the original idea for the story?

"The falling tree freeing the spirit of the man buried beneath it. Much of *Peace* is autobiographical. The town is pretty much Logan, Ohio, where my father grew up; I lived there for several years as a child, and we went back often for visits until my grandmother died. My parents are buried there."

I asked him later if he identified with any of his protagonists and he said that he did not, but that Alden came nearest. "I certainly do not identify with Severian," he emphasized.

The two "Latro" novels, *Soldier of the Mist* and *Soldier of Arete*, are semi-historical fantasies set in Ancient Greece. Wolfe is fascinated by Greek civilization and has taught himself Classical Greek. He complains bitterly that he has, up to now, been unable to find a suitably colloquial dictionary of the subject, the kind a traveller to Ancient Greece might find useful, and threatens to compile one himself. So any time-travelling Professors of Greek, please get in touch...

His interest started when his father gave him H. G. Wells's *Outline of History*. In the stories Latro, another of GW's wounded hero-soldiers, is brain-damaged in battle and

this has resulted in total loss of memory; not only his past is gone, together with his true name and identity, but he is unable to remember even recent events for more than a day. To counteract this he keeps a journal, to be read every morning, so that he can keep some kind of track of what is happening around him. It is this journal which we read. Almost as a compensation for his loss, Latro is able to see the gods and other supernatural beings of ancient times. Unfortunately, by the end of the second book we still don't know who he really is and it may be that we shall never find out.

"No, no third Latro story unless I can figure out how to show that Latro is actually somebody famous, and thus entitled to adventures in a historical novel." This is what I was told in the first interview and he said much the same on the second occasion. It will be a long time before his present major project is off his hands, so no time for Latro.

So what is the next project, now that the *Long Sun* series is complete? He said: "It's *The Book of the Short Sun*." It is a sequel of course. "To explain what it's about I'll have to tell what happens at the end of the *Long Sun*." I was horrified, not having had the opportunity to read the fourth novel at the time of our interview, and I said I didn't want to know the ending until I could read it. He was amused, laughed and told me anyway. But *I'm saying nothing*, except that the new story will concern the young man, Horn (the one who was playing basketball with Silk, right at the beginning of *Nightside*), and events outside the Generation Starship.

Stories full of nightmare futures, death, decay, lost love, old age and madness... So what is Gene Wolfe frightened of? He thought for a minute. "I'm not fond of heights and I get claustrophobic. And sharks – I'm really afraid of sharks." In the middle of Illinois the danger seemed minimal.

What about death and aging? He admitted to worrying about aging. "When you see signs of age in your own children it's quite frightening."

And what about madness? Severian regards the moment when he realizes that he is not entirely sane as perhaps the worst of his life. Has Gene Wolfe ever thought he might be going insane? He said that sometimes he had.

Why? Because people had sometimes implied that he was mad and, besides, he knew that he had really met many of the characters he had invented. "I haven't met Severian yet. When I do, he will be a very scary person. Severian does not always realize the effect he has on other people."

I had asked previously which among his novels and short stories were his favourites. He mentioned the short stories "West Wind," "The Eyeflash Miracles" and "The God and His Man," and the novel *There Are Doors*. This time I asked if his choices were the same and after a little thought, he decided that they were. When asked why he had picked one of his less well-known novels he answered that it was because he felt that he had achieved what he had set out to do on that occasion – to portray a truly ordinary man, with no special intelligence or other gifts to whom extraordinary things happen.

He related an apparently true incident that had happened to him and had been the inspiration for the book. He was wandering around the back streets of Chicago looking at the small shops. He entered one, an antique shop run by a poorly-dressed Oriental-looking man. The goods displayed were interesting but very overpriced. Through a door in the back, he could see an emaciated woman nursing a baby. He left without buying anything but began to feel that he should have – the people were clearly poor and needed the money. He returned, but in spite of diligent searching was unable to find the shop. Nor has he ever found it. "It simply was not there." He is convinced that he had wandered into some kind of time warp. Was the shop perhaps in Hong Kong and the prices in Hong Kong dollars? He insists that something weird was going on. And so, near the beginning of *There Are Doors*, Mr Green buys a doll from a rather peculiar shop.

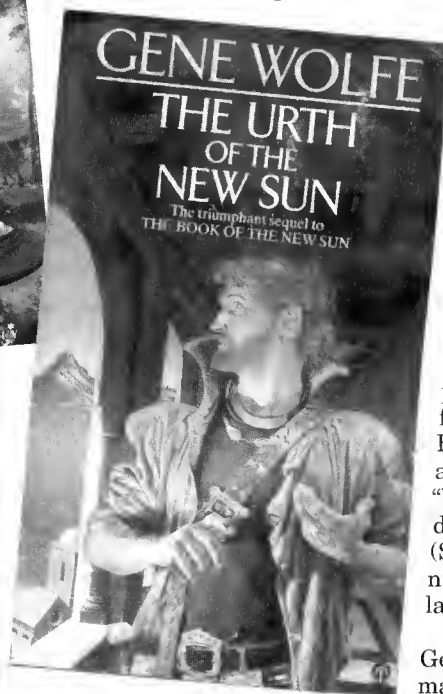
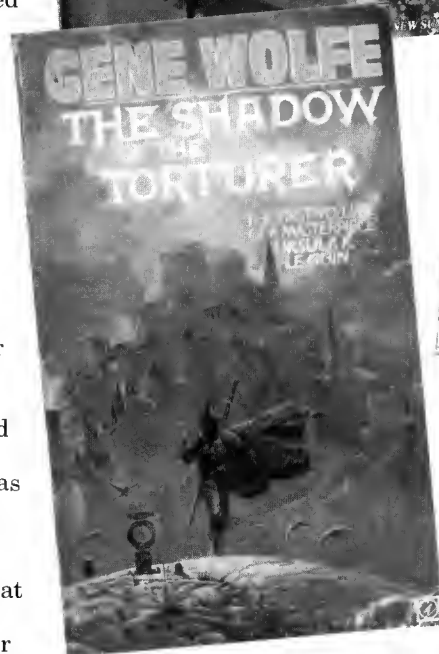
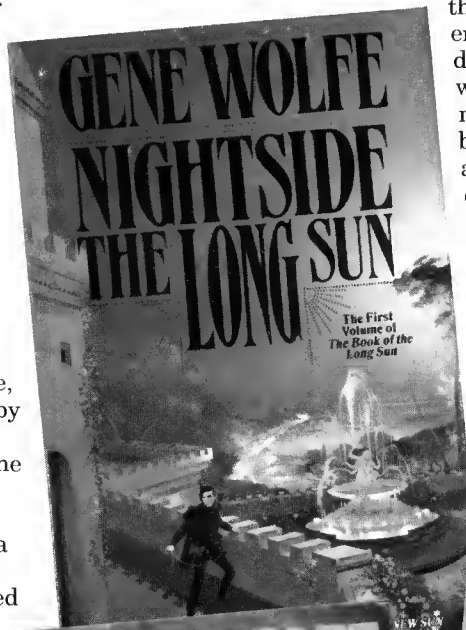
Gene Wolfe does not have a high opinion of academics – see the short story "Civis Laputus Sum" or his essay "The Rewards of Authorship." Did he feel that because he was a writer of science fiction he did not receive the recognition he deserved from the academic establishment?

"Oh, no. There should be far more of that kind of thing." This was not

the answer I expected so I repeated the question. "I'm talking about professors of English here in the U.S. There are some good ones, thank goodness. As a group, they are contemptible. Artists should not be praised by these people."

How did he respond to not being as popular with the book-buying public as some other sf authors? "My popularity is up to me, clearly. It is no one's duty to read my books, save mine. I write books that thousands of people enjoy. I want to write books

that hundreds of thousands will enjoy; and that doesn't mean writing worse, it means writing better." Then he added emphatically: "But there is only one source of a



Gene Wolfe story and that is me." This would appear self-evident, but he used almost the same form of words in a foreword to one of his short story collections,

so to reiterate the point is clearly of particular significance to him.

In our original interview I had asked if he had any more ambitions. His answer then was: "Perhaps 15 years ago I had a man tell me that he'd found *The Fifth Head of Cerberus* in his hotel on Bora Bora. That comes pretty close. I'd like to have somebody around 20 find one of my books in the run-down fiction section of some little public library, and check it out, out of pity or curiosity, and feel that he or she had discov-

ered something strange and wonderful that no one else knew about."

This time my last question was: "Are you happy with the way your career has turned out?"

"Oh, yes. A while back I saw an article on Robert Graves at the front of the book section of *The Washington Post*, and on the opposite page was an article about me. I never thought such a thing could be possible."

My final recollection of the Wolfes is of a remarkable restaurant where we breakfasted on my last morning. (Americans go out for breakfast. Did you know that? I certainly didn't.) This place was got up to be a rain forest. There were tropical rain storms, complete with thunder and lightning, occurring at precisely regular intervals. Fortunately we were protected from the "rain" by a canopy which the management called a "Magic Mushroom." There was also a mechanical parakeet which went "scrrrch" every

30 seconds without fail. The drinks were delicious and had names like "Monty's Python." We told very silly 1960s jokes. "What's green and hairy and goes up and down?" (roared over the "tropical" Muzak – Gene made them turn it down). "How do you know when an elephant has been in the fridge?" (Scrrrch!) Rosemary knew the answer to that one. "What's yellow and dangerous to swim in?" (Scrrrch! Flash of lightning, etc.) Gene laughed a great deal.

Was this the real Gene Wolfe? Or is he the man whose delight in paradox, confusion, lateral thinking and downright awkwardness makes one feel that his watchword should be "contrariwise"? Or is he the man whose imagination is so overwhelming that he sometimes doubts his sanity? Or the man whose most famous invented character was a professional torturer? Or the man who is hypnotized by names? Or the man who worships God?

Perhaps he answered the question himself in one of his self-conducted interviews. He wrote then that the Gene Wolfe people talk to "is not me, or at least very seldom."

"Have you lost the real you?" he asked himself next. Answer: "No, I'm still here."

Perhaps I met him; perhaps I didn't. One thing's for sure: I know the answer to the last silly-joke question. The answer is shark-infested custard. That should scare him. ■

because they are bad for you is dubious; the comparison is pointless because what is being compared is merely the scaffolding on which the respective screenplays are constructed.

Although I generally concur with his comparison of *Neverwhere* and *The Crow Road*, I must disagree when he applies the same criteria to the *Star Trek*-vs-*Babylon 5* debate. Like any self-respecting sf fan I soon became addicted when a brand-new TV show aired, which boldly dared to go... And yet I also find myself at an impasse – although not between *B-5* and *Trek*, but with *Trek* itself. I have become disconsolate with aspects of *Star Trek: The Licence to Print Money*. I don't want to see *ST* become the McDonalds of sf on TV; but it is becoming more indigestible and beginning to repeat rather badly.

Watching earlier *ST:TNG* episodes re-run on the BBC I notice that some are just as wanting as some early *B-5* episodes. I recall that *ST:DS9* started on similarly shaky grounds. A new TV series often needs more than one season to mature and attract either a cult or a popular audience, the original *Star Trek* being a case in point.

This brings me to *Star Trek: Voyager*, conspicuous by its absence from Mr Brazier's discourse. An exemplary movie-style title sequence with a lavish movie-music score, apart from the rather unfortunate appearance of the vessel, cannot disguise this badly executed and bitterly disappointing *Trek* outing. I confess to missing entire episodes of this show, without the slightest signs of any withdrawal symptoms. Still, I will dip in and apply the "new season, any improvement?" filter from time to time.

All good TV certainly does "aspire to the condition of soap opera." It is the bastard offspring of the movie-matinée space operas, principally *Flash Gordon* and *Buck Rogers*. Of course, space opera on TV has grown up from those early pulp serials, so that we can pry, spy, and eavesdrop on the characters' lives. Sf as "space opera" on TV has really only recently reclaimed its rightful heritage. Simply put, addictive fiction, whether soap opera or space opera, relies on a continuous narrative with complex interwoven sub-plots from one episode to the next, and often ends with a dramatic cliff-hanger to ensure that the consumer returns.

So now we come to *Babylon 5*. How dare Mr Straczynski say "let's try this another way"? If you invested in subsequent seasons, you have been handsomely rewarded. Yes it is addictive, in the way that a TV space opera is and the majority of *Star Trek* isn't. And that's the whole point. You're not just along for the ride; you can't help involving yourself in a meaningful and interesting drama where, as in real life, there is political back-stabbing, betrayal, uninformed decisions that have massive repercussions down the line. Where a trusted people (or race),

whose integrity seemed unquestionable, are found to have a secret agenda, and where wars, no matter what the preventative efforts of all concerned, still spin horrifically out of control.

I enjoy characterizations where fellow officers don't necessarily cry on each other's or a captain's shoulder, to be soothed by pseudo-psychobabble (can you imagine that in any other militaristic setting?). I appreciate that they do bottle it up or hit the bottle, cry themselves to sleep, have occasions of self-doubt, or that they get tired, make mistakes and crash and burn like anyone else. I like to see a continuous drama unfolding, and to employ more brain cells than I do when watching a series of short stories where technobabble often saves the day.

Don't misunderstand me, I haven't abandoned *Star Trek* completely. *B-5* has its bad moments, especially when it tries to emulate *Trek* – but these occurrences stand out from such an epic saga and, thankfully, now happen far less often. In spite of the *ST: Voyager* debacle, there are signs of great improvement to *ST: DS9*, precisely because of *B-5*, not despite it. A dose of healthy competition doesn't go amiss. While *ST:DS9* lapses into technobabble solutions with almost frightening regularity, it has also adopted continuous narratives (heaven forbid, *Trek* with story arcs!), and although limited to local skirmishes it's an improvement on weird forehead/ears/nose of the week, or "adventures with our Holodeck."

What I can't understand is why *Trek* addicts feel threatened by *B-5*. Is it because of the more colourful space hardware in the style of the classy sf-cover artwork of Foss, White, Harris, Roberts, Jones and Burns, brilliantly brought to life, rather than the boring battleship grey? Perhaps that it attracted *Trek* writers? Or *DS9* peripheral actors (who have earned the sobriquet "9 to 5s" from the regular *B-5* crew)? Or stars, such as the widow Roddenberry putting in an appearance, or even Walter Koenig (Chekov) with a recurring role as Bester, in which he can stretch his talents at last? Is it possible, because the *B-5* storyline commands the viewer's full attention, that at first Trekkers just couldn't be bothered – and now that the show is attracting more attention for its imaginative, complex and exciting drama, they can't follow the plot because they missed out?

Unfortunately the perception of the greater viewing populace is that sf as manifest on TV is *Trek*, QED. What disappoints me is that *Trek* addicts who claim to be sf fans often appear to be just as resistant to new ideas from any other quarter. It's only after the absorption of those ideas into the *Trek* mythology that they deem them acceptable. Surely the influence of the new wave "pre-Millennium tension" sf on TV, such as *B-5* and *The X-Files* has only served to "up the stakes."

I shall be investing my emotional

chips on the gambling tables in both *B-5*'s Zocalo and at Quark's on *DS9* and have the best of both worlds, thanks very much. Unfortunately "all good things..." The sad note about all of this is their respective studios have announced an end to both these series. It seems *B-5* will be cut to four seasons, with a couple of "movie" specials, and as *DS9* approaches the end of its run (which means, heaven help us, that *Voyager* is *Trek*'s last best hope) then the wrench away from either of these additions will come all too soon.

P.S. *Third Rock from the Sun*? *The Munsters*/Addams Family for the 1990s! **Christopher Cotton**  
Daventry, Northants

**Paul Brazier replies:** I largely concur with what Christopher Cotton has to say. My main quibble was and is with this constant harping on the five-year story arc as any kind of value-added statement. Any TV show is only as good as its most recent episode, and will be cancelled if it doesn't get the audiences. What happens to the five-year arc if the season is curtailed? Do we simply never find out what happens in the end? Does anyone really care? Do me a favour: nothing on TV is that important.

I didn't mention *Voyager* because my letter was already too long. But the many episodes of *Voyager* I have seen are trash. That isn't easy to say – I love space opera, adore mile-long space-ships, and am besotted with any other manifestations of the future I can believe in. But that is the small boy in me speaking. As an adult, I also enjoy complex tales of human interaction. None of these things appear in *Voyager*. All of them have appeared in one or two episodes of *Little House on the Wormhole* (especially since they acquired the Defiant) and *ST:TNG*. And few of them have shown up in the other sf I watch on TV (see list last time).

*Third Rock from the Sun* is superb, but not really sf. I would love to see another great sf series. What made *ST:TNG* so intriguing was the move forward in time from the original *ST*. *DS9* and *Voyager* are simply alternate takes, attempts to wring more mileage out of the idea. To my eyes *B-5* is just another take – "let's do this another way" is your phrase, not mine – but this is all based firmly on the early 1980s *ST:TNG* vision of the future, even as *ST* was a mid-1960s vision of the future. The real reason that to the general audience sci-fi is cognate with *Star Trek* is that all these fictions are based on it and look like it. If it is a truism that nothing dates as quickly as science fiction, then in order to create a new great sf series someone needs to set their fiction at least another 200-300 years into the future. Meantime, we're stuck with a 15-year-old future, and squabbling about different takes on it won't change that. And that is the real reason that I am bewildered as to why anyone should care about *B-5*.



# Queen Bee

Keith Brooke

Colvin Stark stood alone by his overlander trike on the rough road to Chorale. He had only ventured out because Joanie had left him.

Vishwan Dome was behind him, its monocarbon shell covered with tangles of native vegetation and non-motive fauna. All around him, the giant, bifurcating structures of the local tree analogues loomed, fronds crackling and hissing in the wind. Their multiple trunks were coated in the slimy fibroid growths of the larval phases of the myriad fliers which circled around his head as he stood, indecisively, on the fringe of the jungle. He hadn't left the dome since coming down to Rhapsody two years before.

He could turn back, even now. Let her go this time. Start all over again.

A sudden wet sensation spread across his right cheek, just below the moulded rim of his goggles. He reached up, felt the bulbous form of a polyp which must have jumped at him from a nearby crag. Already, its exploratory microhyphae were probing the flesh of his face, tasting what he was... who he was.

He pulled the thing off before its sensory juices could penetrate too far – before they could get into his bloodstream – and hurled it into the undergrowth.

"She's gone to Chorale." 3Petra had been certain, and 3Petra should know. Whenever Joanie was upset she went to 3Petra to sell the wired-up phreak her anxieties. 3Petra was a mood therapist turned angst phreak, getting her highs from the biochemical residues of other people's lows. A dread head. "And hey, Colvin," 3Petra had added. "You should share your stresses. Feed your phreak to me. It'd free you, but you never do. You guard your head too well, Colvin Stark. You need to let people in, let yourself out."

Colvin had no intention of sharing his head with anybody, but particularly not a delisted mood therapist like 3Petra. And then her words sank in: Chorale wasn't just another domed city like Vishwan, it was an open settlement, houses built in the jungle, food grown in the open where anything could get to it.

He should have guessed Joanie would go native.

It was her difference that had attracted him in the first place, her difference that had dragged them apart ever since.

Colvin had grown up on Capital, the largest of Rhapsody's orbiting habitats. By the time he was 28 he had never been more than 50 clicks from Capital, and he would have been content to spend the rest of his days in the orbiting cylinder. He had found his niche as a design surgeon, meeting the unceasing demand for change, for novelty – public service suited him.

Joanie had visited him to have her skin pigments reprogrammed. She came to him purple and he made

her speckled cappuccino, which went well with her straight black hair and her amber eyes. She had come on an interstitial liner from Madrigalle with her parents; in her 23 years she had been to more than a dozen colony planets. "I love change," she told him. "I need stimuli."

When she kissed him, he had thought about it for several seconds before placing his hands on her shoulders and kissing her in return. Joanie was impetuous, a free spirit, a butterfly desperate to break free. Colvin was a rock, a continent, an anchor she dragged in her wake. They came to rely on each other's sheer *oppositeness*.

Joanie was the sensitive one: she would sense things that Colvin would take a week to work out for himself. Communication for her was a wave of empathic understanding, of reading between Colvin's carefully constructed lines. Which made her disregard for his feelings all the more painful. Joanie had never seemed to care about the consequences her endless quest for the different had for those around her. Any damage done along the way could easily be fixed. And perhaps the thing most difficult for Colvin to accept was that she was right: he would forgive her anything, the damage she did him could always be fixed, or at least patched over.

She had left him once before, taking a ferry down to Port August and thence to Vishwan. When, at last, he had found her, burning her brain on the native psychotropics and selling her pain to 3Petra, he saw that she had been expecting him – he had always known he would follow her, pick up the pieces of her life.

Now, he knew she would be waiting for him in Chorale, or wherever her wanderlust had taken her from there. Wherever she was, she would be certain Doc Colvin would come and patch her together. Again, he considered turning his back on her, selling his grief to 3Petra and making a new start.

He kicked the overlander into life and set off, heading into the jungle along the track the boosted policeman had assured him led to Chorale.

As night fell, he broke out the survival pack he had bought from the cop. He pulled the sleep sac over his head, rolled it down and sealed it at his feet. It was several sizes too big – built for the jacked up body of a professional enforcer – but that made it less claustrophobic.

He lay down, let the sac inflate. In the dim glow of its interior he set about disinfecting himself. The exposed parts of his face were covered with stiff, crystalline scales and the bulbous growths of three flier polyps; one hand was engulfed in a jellied pulp which had somehow penetrated the join between glove and cuff. Most of Rhapsody's life-forms were not life-threatening, as such – due to incompatibilities between the major amino acids, Terran and Rhapsodian life-forms were unable

to digest much of each other's bodies. Colvin was only so much roughage to a Rhapsodian predator.

The real dangers were more subtle.

The dominant senses in Rhapsody's life-forms were smell and taste – a biochemical wonderland. A Rhapsodian flier lived in a world of rich sensory experience: it sensed its world as a multidimensional biochemical map, where the flavours of every animal, every plant and bug and spore that had passed through, left a distinctive trace. And of course, the evolutionary answer to such pinpoint perception was disguise and mimicry: creatures continually sampled their surroundings and tailored their body chemistry to imitate what had gone before. The most foolproof way of deceiving a potential predator was to trick its brain chemistry, leave biochemical vectors which would convince the predator that its prey was not there: in a world where taste and scent is king, the most successful deceivers will taste and smell invisible.

But in a world where native and Terran biochemistries did little more than overlap, signals could get confused. The exposed human was continually tasted and sampled, his or her body chemistry copied and transformed. Most Rhapsodian life-forms were harmless, tasting and then departing, but a few were more intrusive, capable of producing neurochemical analogues that could shut down the brain, send the heart into fatal arrhythmia, block the processes of cell respiration. Many more were merely psychotropic, mimicking various neurotransmitters to induce hallucinations, euphoria or sheer, irreversible insanity – these substances kept phreaks like 3Petra in business and might, in time, become one of Rhapsody's major industries.

Colvin carried a sense pad to warn him of such an attack, but it had remained reassuringly green all day. Now, as he peeled off the last of the vegetal scales from his neck, he programmed his dreamer to reassure him in the night.

Most of the life on Rhapsody was harmless. It was the people you had to watch.

He set out in the morning, the overlander's digester cells recharged overnight. It was going to be a long ride but, he realized, he was beginning to enjoy himself. In their relationship he had brought stability to Joanie but in return she had forced change and novelty upon him. If it wasn't for Joanie he'd still be up in Capital, guiding the vain in the futile quest of changing their lives by changing their bodies. Joanie had tapped him on the skull on more than one occasion, saying, "It's what's in here that matters, Colvin." This from the woman who had come to Capital with purple skin and amber eyes, and left it speckled cappuccino, dark-eyed. As if she knew what he was thinking, she would spread her hands modestly and add, "Of course, the outer layers help."

He met a fellow traveller late in the day. "How far to Chorale?" Colvin asked, feeling vulnerable and exposed.

The traveller was a man in a middle-aged body, although Colvin knew that need not necessarily indicate his years. He had straw-coloured hair and pink skin dappled with white scar tissue – from continued exposure to Rhapsodian life, Colvin supposed. The man had made little attempt to cover himself up.

The man smiled amicably. "Chorale?" he said. "Far? How? To?" He laughed, then tried again. "Chorafar? Howchoralto?" He stepped towards Colvin, dark eyes suddenly intense.

Now Colvin saw that what he had taken for scar tissue was, in fact, a series of fleshy white whorls of some native life-form. It looked as if the man's flesh was growing over them, sealing them into his soma.

Colvin fingered the stun gun in his jacket pocket, then pumped the overlander and tore away along the track with a high-pitched whine of bioturbo.

After a few minutes he slowed to a more cautious pace, fearful of the consequences of having an accident out here.

He glanced down at his sense pad. To his horror, it pulsed a vivid orange.

A short time later it had returned to a passive green. The man must have been infested with one of the dangerous psychotropics. Colvin chastised himself: he should be more careful. What was the point of taking precautions if you forgot to use them?

He reached Chorale after two and a half days' travel. It had taken longer than he had anticipated, but then he had never travelled in the open before, never had to travel on roads frequently overgrown with writhing, fluid lianas or flooded with shallow pools of living jelly that, on sensing a strange life-form, flowed *upwards* – over the wheels and forks of the overlander, across the biocells and boosters, up his boots and legs until, at last he was clear of the pool, able to scrape the fecund muck off with his heavily gloved hands.

Chorale was a town which, under most circumstances, might be regarded as pretty: a cluster of no more than a hundred buildings spread across the slopes of a valley, either side of a winding river. But to Colvin the place looked the very reverse of the image he had grown up with of a typical colony settlement: instead of sturdy A-frames and cabins, tidy farmsteads, communities based around the local trading post with everything in its place, Chorale was haphazard, shabby, every surface covered with alien growths. Four bridges crossed the river, their elegant spans festooned with creepers and glistening, native growths; two were so submerged by growths that they looked impassable.

No wonder the official colony cities on Rhapsody were protected with monocarbon domes, their inhabitants and croplands carefully shielded from the native biotic chaos.

*It is I who am the alien*, Colvin reminded himself. *This is the natural.*

He rode down into the town.

Forget all the quaint, official imagery of colony planets, this was what real colonization must be like. Where the people of Vishwan Dome were little different from those up in the habitats – and probably from those almost anywhere else in the colonized systems – the people of Chorale had become a part of the landscape. They had reached a settlement with the world. They belonged.

Many wore growths on their faces and arms, but equally many did not. The polyps and scales would drop off in time, after all, when their biochemical inquisitiveness had been satisfied. It was not so much a badge of citizenship, as an everyday fact of life.

Colvin was the only one who stared. In his goggles and protective clothing he felt more alien than ever.

He glanced at his sense pad. He couldn't see what colour it was – the thing was coated with grey scales, tasting its alien biochemical circuitry.

Some children were pointing at him now, making rings with thumb and forefinger and holding them to their eyes. Colvin considered for long seconds, then reached up to remove his goggles and roll his protective hood back down around his neck. He could not believe that Joanie would wear such paraphernalia – if she could survive out here then so too could Colvin.

A man was lolling nearby, watching Colvin with a wry smile on that part of his face not obscured by an inflated purple polyp. Inside the glutinous sac, Colvin could see the writhing forms of several fliers: soon the thing would burst and the creatures would be free of their pupal phase. The man was chewing something, but Colvin chose not to look too closely.

"Excuse me," said Colvin. "I'm looking for someone. I was told she had come to Chorale." It wasn't a big settlement: if she was here, then he must find her soon.

"Everyone comes looking for something," said the man. "To get stoned, to meld, to 'live the rustic ideal.' Ain't always that they find it."

For a moment, Colvin recalled the madman he had encountered on the road from Vishwan. But no, this man looked sane enough.

"My partner came this way," Colvin persisted. "She's so high—" he held a hand flat at the level of his eyebrows "—with straight black hair, speckled cappuccino skin, dark eyes. Hyper, like a hummingbird. Her name's Joanie Stark, although she might call herself Joanie Melvern again, I don't know."

"You love her."

Colvin was taken aback by the man's directness. "I... I don't know," he said, startled by his own answer. "I want her back."

The man nodded, as if considering his answer. "A whole lot of people come through here," he said, finally. "But most are only passing. Reckon I'd have remembered your Joanie if I'd seen her, though. There's all kinds of phreak communities in these parts – that's where they usually end up. Melding and juicing up and skin surfing. She's too phreaked up, she might not want to come home, you understand?"

"I know the risks," said Colvin. He always did: it was Joanie who never worked out the risks before trying something new. "Is there somewhere I can find out?"

The man nodded. "Ask Marcia Akinwade at the stores – anyone comes through Chorale, they stop at Marcia's. She's got a memory better'n most of us out here. Her partner Rud'll know if your Joanie left by river – he does the supply runs to Sendl and Jade. Denny Henders, the mood man, might know something, too. He sees himself as something of a spiritual shepherd, these parts. Tries to keep track of the phreaks when they come through. And if you're looking for a bed for the night, ask Marcia. Most folk round here put travellers up, but Marcia does it better'n most."

The man straightened now, and spat out a frothy green wad into the street. He touched a finger to his purple growth and said, "And when you're wanting to head into the hills, you won't find a better guide'n me:

Dav Akinwade."

Marcia remembered Joanie, just as Dav had said she would. She was a small woman, with stark grey hair pulled hard back from a bony face. Big grey eyes fixed on Colvin. Assessing him, he realized, working out just how much her information might be worth.

He asked if he could stay the night, offered her a price that would be astronomical even up in Capital. She nodded, said, "Girl fitting that description was here last month. Might be her. She didn't say her name. I wouldn't say she was hyper, though: more subdued, phreaked on something, I'd say."

He hated to ask, but he had to: "Was she alone?"

Marcia Akinwade hesitated, then shook her head. "No," she said. "She was part of a group. She seemed like an outsider. A newcomer. As if she'd only just joined up with them." She hesitated again, then added, "They were phreaks – come for the local psychotropics. I heard one of them say they were heading upriver to join the Melders. Your girl didn't seem to care, didn't seem to care about anything at all."

That didn't sound like Joanie. The woman must be right: she must have taken something. He tried to shake off his unease about her being in such a state, in the care of some unknown group of phreaks.

He left his overlander in Marcia's yard and headed down to the river. A man was tending to the motor of a small dinghy, threading new digester filaments into the corroded tracks of the turbo.

"Rud Akinwade?"

Without looking up, the man shook his head, then nodded down the rickety jetty to an old barge. Crouched low in its hold was a thin, dark-skinned man with purple and grey growths covering his exposed torso, like the scales of a fish.

"Rud Akinwade?"

The man looked up, nodded, returned to his work. "I'm looking for a young woman who passed through here last month," said Colvin. "Dark hair, dark eyes, speckled coffee skin, usually hyperactive but she might have been ill. She was with a group of phreaks, heading upriver. Your partner said you might have taken them on a supplies run."

"Phreaks or Melders?" said the man. "Don't take Melders an' I only take phreaks if their money's good and up front."

Colvin had heard the term *Melder* before – just another minor sect, phreaking on native psychotropics, he had thought – but here in Chorale the term was used almost as one of abuse. "What's a Melder?" he asked.

Rud Akinwade grunted.

From behind Colvin another voice joined in: "Phreaks with a purpose."

Colvin turned to see that the other man had finished with his digester filaments and had joined them. Colvin raised his eyebrows and the man introduced himself.

"Denny Henders, only mood therapist for a hundred clicks. What I mean by that is to say they're not just like ordinary phreaks – come upcountry to get smashed and laid." He tapped the side of his head. "They believe in this stuff," he continued. "They claim to have found a fibroid that synthesizes a substance near-identical to beta-acetylcholine. Near enough that it gets into your



blood and then into your head and phreaks you, but different enough that it only keys into a specific part of the temporal lobe. Once its there it unfolds its own pharmaceutical message.”

“And...?”

“They reckon it makes you telepathic,” said Denny Henders.

Instantly, Colvin knew Joanie was with the Melders. Whether this particular phreak worked or not, it was the idea that mattered, the *possibility*. Joanie would grab at something like that with all she could.

“Where can I find them?” he asked. He turned to Rud Akinwade. “Can you take me upriver to wherever they’re based?”

The boatman grunted again. “You tell me where they’re based an’ if it’s on my run I’ll take you there.”

Colvin turned to Denny Henders.

“Rud’s brother, Dav, will take you out to see Taylor’s Head, if you ask him. Taylor was a Melder once – she might be able to help you.”

They set out on foot the following morning. “Couple of hours,” Dav had said. “Taylor has a place up on Mackie Hill.” Overnight, Dav’s polyp had hatched, and now all that remained was a glistening, slimy wound over half of his scalp. As they walked, the wound dried up, and was soon coated with spores drifting down from the surrounding jungle growth.

Colvin was not disturbed by the sight, or smell, of Dav’s growth. He had programmed his dreamer last night to help him accept what were everyday phenomena out here. Even when a polyp attached itself to his neck and refused to be pulled away, he remained calm. There were more important things to concern him.

Like what Joanie was doing with the phreaks. He had been worried ever since Marcia Akinwade said she had been subdued, phreaked on something bad. He wanted to know how she became involved with this group.

When they came to Taylor’s Head, Colvin understood why it was so termed. Where polyps were often growths attached to human beings, Taylor had become little more than a human growth in a garden of polyps.

High up on what Dav called Mackie Hill there was a proliferation of cushioned growths: bulbous, fluid-filled sacs, fleshy fronds of some sort of vegetation, the crusty scales of something which looked like enormous lichen but – Colvin saw – was creeping infinitely slowly across the surface of the polyps like an invading army.

And cushioned at the heart of this exotic garden was a human head – or rather, a human face, the remainder being covered with native growths. The skin of this face was pure, flawless, thin lips kept moist by a continually flicking tongue.

Taylor smiled when she saw them, although the expression seemed forced. Colvin nodded in greeting, then without preamble said, “I come in the hope that you can help me find my partner, she—”

“—has gone with the Melders,” finished Taylor. “I know these things: I was, of course, a Melder once, myself.”

“You mean...?”

“We all have a latent ability,” Taylor said. “It separates us from the animals. As with the sense of smell, modern humankind has let its telepathic talent slide. The Melders have the key to unlocking what is latent

in us all. They unlocked it in me and I could not take it – the enforced *oneness*. I fled. I am a hermit.”

Her look took on a sudden fierce intensity. “I hate to be with people. I hate their flaws, always naked before me.”

“I’m sorry,” said Colvin. “I only want to find Joanie.”

“You only want to use me and then go,” snapped Taylor. “I see through it all.” Then, more tiredly, she added, “I wish you would just go, that you hadn’t come at all.”

“We’ll go,” said Colvin. “But will you just give us a few minutes? Help me find Joanie? I think she’s in trouble.”

Taylor smiled now, a cruel smile. “Of course she’s in trouble,” she hissed. “You think she *wants* to be up at the Melding with those phreaks? You think it was her choice?”

“What do you mean?”

Taylor held back for a long time before replying. “Some people are special,” she said, at last. “Where we all have a natural empathy, in some of us it is not so dormant. These individuals are extremely rare, but they exist. You can use the analogy of a bee hive: if ordinary Melders can achieve a certain, workerly *oneness* – the polyps around Taylor shuddered at the word – then such a uniquely powerful individual is as a queen to them.”

Colvin closed his eyes. Until now he had not believed the Melders were any more than just another bunch of phreaks getting stoned on native psychotropics. But now... he recalled Joanie’s sensitivity, her... her *empathy*. People could relate to her, complete strangers would spill out their troubles to her. She always understood. He remembered all the times when they had been together and it was as if their brains were working as one, each knowing what was in the other’s thoughts. It was true: Joanie was special. She had a talent, an empathy. She was to be the Melders’ queen bee.

“And this... this ‘special individual,’” he said. “She would be drawn to the Melders? She would sense that they had found a way to fully unlock her talent?”

Taylor’s smile was back again. “Oh, no,” she said. “One so special lives in fear of their gift. They suppress it, they deny it. They want it in the end, but until they are awoken to their gift they live in fear of it. Your Joanie would not have joined the Melding voluntarily.”

Now Colvin knew why Joanie was so subdued when she had passed through Chorale. The Melders had done something to her, phreaked her on something so that she would co-operate.

He stared at Taylor intently. “One more question before we go,” he said. “Where are they?”

He watched the Melders’ settlement for a night and a day before acting.

They were based in a failed farmstead about ten clicks from the river. Rud Akinwade had ferried Colvin and Dav to the nearest point, and then the two of them had trekked through the jungle for most of a day before they reached the settlement.

Dav had left almost immediately. “I’m not staying here,” he told Colvin. “I wish you luck, but I’m not getting mixed up with the Melders.” His fear had been almost palpable – so much so that his mere presence had made Colvin feel uncomfortable. His spirits had lifted greatly when his guide departed: he didn’t want to be contaminated by the other man’s fear. It was all he could do to contain his own.

At first, the Melders looked just like any other phreak commune – just another group of dopeheads living the rustic ideal.

But Colvin was careful to keep his distance. He still did not know how much of Taylor's story to believe, but if it was true that these phreaks were now more empathically attuned he did not want them to sense his hostile presence in the jungle.

His survival pack was a tremendous aid. He used its grippers to help him climb trees, and he could stick the sleep sac to any surface and set its chameleon coating to blend with the surroundings.

As he observed the Melders he started to sense a pattern to it all – the kind of synchronicity of birds flying in a flock, or a shoal of fish. And then he noticed that the Melders rarely seemed to talk. They were all smashed, he thought – you don't talk much when you've got a headful.

At last, he saw Joanie. She was being kept in one of the smaller outbuildings – there was always at least one guard on the door.

They led her out at midday and she sat cross-legged, part of a circle of about 40 Melders. They sang songs, chanted, watched children dancing around a fire. And then they led her back into her prison.

On the second night, they gathered by the fire for songs and chanting again; afterwards, they led Joanie back to her outbuilding.

Colvin waited until the settlement was quiet, the fire reduced to glowing embers. There was one man guarding the outbuilding, slumped on a chair in the doorway.

Colvin dropped from his perch in a tree and approached the settlement.

He came to the outbuilding from behind. When he reached the corner, he peered round, fearing that the guard would have sensed his approach. The figure was still slumped in his chair.

Colvin advanced and finally the guard jerked upright, eyes wide.

Colvin raised the stun gun and fired. There was a sudden scent of ozone and the man fell forward. Reacting quickly, Colvin caught the guard by his shoulders and pushed him back into his chair. He'd be out until daybreak, but if anyone looked they would just assume he was asleep. By then, Colvin and Joanie should be most of the way to the river.

He went inside, saw a human form curled up under a blanket on the floor.

For a moment he was scared. Scared of *Joanie*, of what Taylor had said she was. She must know him so intimately: all his weaknesses, all the things all of us hide beneath a veneer of civilization.

He reached for her shoulder, shook her.

It was several seconds before she stirred, then her eyes opened, she saw him and she was in his arms, trembling, sobbing.

He pulled her upright. He hadn't taken her drugged condition into his plans. He hoped they would be fast enough.

He led her towards the door, then reached for his goggles and placed them on her head. "These'll help you see in the dark," he told her. When they were outside she seemed to perk up, as if the night air was breaking

through to her. "Come on," he said. "We have to hurry."

They had reached the edge of the clearing when the alarm was raised.

Colvin heard voices coming from the farmstead. He pushed Joanie ahead, urged her on. When they had found the track to the river, he paused, glanced back. A group of Melders had covered half of the distance already.

He realized they would be caught. "Go on," he hissed at Joanie, willing her head to clear. "Follow this track ten clicks to the river and if I'm not with you, hail the supply boat that passes every mid-morning."

She carried on running and he didn't even know if she'd heard him. He sidestepped into the trees, wondering desperately how to outsmart a group of telepaths.

Maybe they were just ordinary phreaks, after all, because they kept coming.

When they were within range he fired the stun gun and one of them cried out and fell. He fired again and another dropped, then his wrists exploded in pain as a club came down, smashing the gun from his grip.

When his head had cleared from the pain, he was lying in the open, surrounded by Melders. They seemed to have given up pursuit of Joanie, as if suddenly she didn't matter.

Then he saw the way they were looking at him: they were grinning, barely able to suppress their excitement.

They had been expecting him.

They hadn't wanted Joanie at all: she was bait in the trap they had set for him.

Even now, as he lay in his room – well guarded, in the main house – he could barely even begin to accept what had happened. He remembered his reaction to the implication that *Joanie* was the talented one – the queen bee. All the little incidents from their shared past, all the little understandings, coincidences of thoughts – it did not have to be Joanie who was responsible for such happenings.

Taylor's Head had told him that the special one would live in fear of their gift, they would suppress it and deny it. Joanie was the vibrant one, the risk-taker – she was not a person living in fear. It was Colvin who had always suppressed his feelings, who never dared act on impulse.

It was Colvin who was the queen bee, and they had trapped him easily.

They treated him well, binding his broken wrists with medic-packs, so they were repaired within days. The food was plain but plentiful, the room modest but comfortable.

They talked to him, explaining their ways. Gradually, Colvin found that his resentment was being overcome. He knew this was a recognized syndrome: the kidnaper victim coming to identify with his captors. He did not think that was the full explanation, though. These people believed what they were saying, even though they were misguided and dangerous.

He understood them.

"We are melding tonight," Madelin told him one day – he had lost track of how long they had held him. "Will you join us? We can't make you take part."

They gathered around the fire and Colvin sat slightly apart as the Melders sang and their children danced.

All the time, he was aware of their looks, their eyes never meeting his own. Like a mating game, a courtship ritual, he realized.

When they started to chant, a small bowl was passed around the circle. Colvin watched curiously as they took it in turns to dab a finger in the bowl and then touch each temple.

As the substance circulated, Colvin became certain he could sense some strange upwelling, something powerful and rich. Something alien.

Last of all, the bowl was deposited at his feet. In it was a substance that was creamy, pale. Automatically, he reached out, touched it. It looked wet, but was dry on his finger. He remembered that Taylor had said the special one would eventually come to want it, this strange oneness that she had found so unbearable. He hesitated, then raised his hand and touched each temple with the alien substance.

Nothing happened for some time, then gradually it rose up, an awareness, a perception he recognized but had always suppressed. His eyes were closed but he could see the gathering quite clearly, sense the minds of those around him. Slowly, tentatively, he reached out, and the other minds responded, welcoming his bright new presence, his melding.

When Joanie came back with a heavily armed posse led by Rud and Dav Akinwade, Colvin was sitting alone in the clearing.

"They've gone," he said, looking up at the group of six men from Chorale. They had come looking for a fight, and now they were disappointed, unnerved by this

strange man sitting alone in the clearing of a deserted farmstead.

Joanie held back. She knew things had changed. She knew that this would never be the Colvin she had loved and resented and pitied for the last three years.

"You'll be coming back then," said Rud finally. The man was confused. He didn't know whether to believe this woman from another planet, or even his brother, who he had never trusted in any case.

"No," said Colvin. He stood, held out a hand to Joanie. "I'm going to join them," he said. "I'm going to lead them. There's so much good we can do."

"But they're kidnappers!" cried Joanie finally. Colvin had been waiting for this outburst, had sensed it building, just as he had sensed this angry group heading up from the river since early this morning.

Colvin smiled. Arguing was a waste of time. He shrugged. "Come with me, Joanie," he said.

Still she hesitated.

He turned and started to walk, then. Joanie would join him. If not now, then soon, when she had managed to get her thoughts together.

He *knew* she would join him.

**Keith Brooke** is no longer "a promising young writer" — or so he informed us on the occasion of his 30th birthday, a few months ago: "I'm currently working on a crime novel, some children's stories and more short stories, collaborating with Eric Brown on a science-fiction novel, trying to sell a fantasy novel and developing multimedia teaching materials. Apart from that, I'm not doing much."

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One of the problems with *Crime Traveller* (Saturdays, BBC 1) is that David Wicks carries on acting as if he's in *EastEnders*, a small, quiet, twinkly performance, as if he has listened to Peter Brooks's advice to Al Pacino in *Looking for Richard* about speaking softly when you act on film. Kochanski, however, carries on as if she's still in *Red Dwarf*, screwing up her face at the funny lines, timing her performance to waiting for the laugh. And Sue Johnston carries on as if she's in *Carry On*, giving a performance which attempts to move out of the soap opera idiom but which misreads the idiom she's moved into: playing the maverick cop's boss but speaking IN A VERY LOUD VOICE TO DEMONSTRATE SHE ISN'T SHEILA GRANT ANY MORE. Her characteristic cry of SLAA-AADE! is the plaintive wail of a million Cowleys and Captain Dobies in a million cop shows before her, but with that slight twist that signals *it's only a kids' show, I'm not taking it seriously, darling* in actorspeak.

Well, all right, I know that Holly Turner is the character, Chloe Annett is the actor, and it's just one of those wacky coincidences that she's also Kochanski in *Red Dwarf* and is thus the only female character in the only two sf programmes the BBC are commissioning at present. And I know Jeff Slade is the character and Michael French is the actor and it's another one of those wacky coincidences that he'd just left off playing Britain's favourite womanizer David Wicks in *EastEnders* about five minutes before *Crime Traveller* started. And I even know that smacking each of them in the mouth for spouting heinous clichés wouldn't be fair because it isn't their fault: what scares me is the thought that Sue Johnston's performance is true to the show's attempted idiom, and Cop Show in Trumpton is what is being aimed at.

The evidence for this theory is in the script, which reads, for the most part, as if it had not been written but generated by randomizing a cliché thesaurus; but it's also in the music – a heavy coating of treacle poured over *Poirot* and now dripping down onto this, its bastard offspring – and in the setting.

The setting? We meet under the clock at a station called Station in that same neutered modern nowhere-land inhabited by *Bugs*; where everything has a label but all the labels are generic. Where, exactly, are we? What station? We are in a landscape devoid of landmarks, where the streets have no name. This is a child's world, a live-action Trumpton, where a bike and car chase will inevitably involve (1) barging into the flower stall, (2) knocking over the pavement café, and, presumably, it is only budget

exigencies that spare us (3) crashing through the men carrying the sheet of plate glass.

Ah, but look: the cop has a gun in his waistband. We are not in Britain at all. We cannot be in the States because our voices are wrong and we drive on the wrong side of the road. We are in mid-Atlantic; that uniquely televisual place where we used to have to stop and check we were speaking bilingually – the elevator? oh, you mean the lift – but where now we simply ignore the fact that British policemen, however on the edge, averse to authority, existentially alone and just plain insubordinate they may be, simply cannot wander around with guns in their waistbands. We are going to sell this to America and the Americans will expect guns; the Brits will follow because they've seen enough Americana to understand the idiom. By jove, chaps, we've been colonized after all!

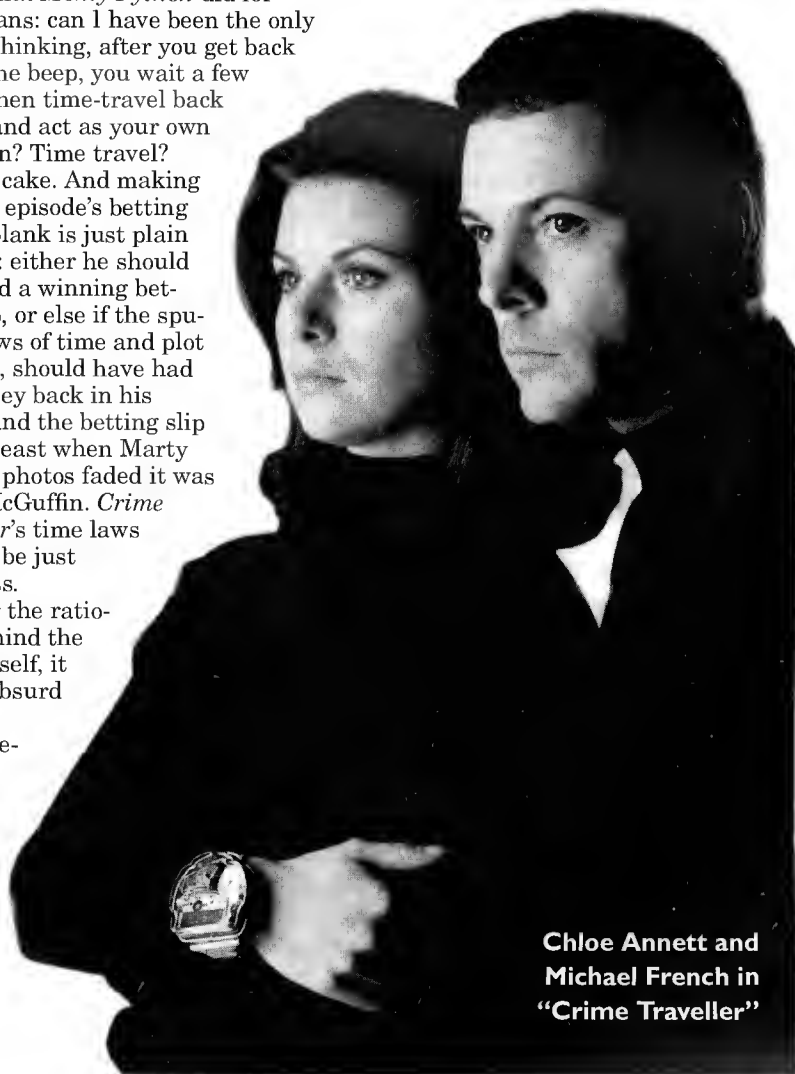
A word about the plots. I am willing to accept the *we have to get back to base before the McGuffin beeps* plot-driver, but as early as episode two we had to run around exhausting ourselves trying to get through a cordon of cops before we got back to base before the beep. Surely, however, *Bill and Ted* have done for time-travel sagas what *Monty Python* did for Arthurians: can I have been the only person thinking, after you get back before the beep, you wait a few hours, then time-travel back to now and act as your own diversion? Time travel? Piece of cake. And making the first episode's betting slip go blank is just plain illogical: either he should have had a winning betting slip, or else if the spurious laws of time and plot demand, should have had the money back in his pocket and the betting slip out. At least when Marty McFly's photos faded it was a plot McGuffin. *Crime Traveller's* time laws seem to be just primness.

As for the rationale behind the series itself, it seems absurd to do a detective-with-a-

# TUBE CORN

Wendy  
Bradley

time-machine story and then make the solutions to the mysteries something that you could work out without breaking into a sweat simply from the plot synopsis in the newspapers. Episode one's Locked Room Mystery – solved by deduction from a broken lamp. Episode two's Poison Plot – solved by deduction from a bottle of pills. But the lamp was still broken, and the pills were still on the desk, in the here and now without



Chloe Annett and  
Michael French in  
"Crime Traveller"



# Under the Stars of Mars

Peter T. Garratt

“That surely isn’t actually happening!” Terence Tarnier exclaimed, almost choking on his *moules marinière*. He cleared his throat with too big a mouthful of the rather dry Chablis, and said plaintively: “Can’t we get on to something a bit more serious?”

Mark Line, his agent, looked taken aback. A flicker of annoyance passed over his face. Then he said in his sincere voice: “But Terry, of course it’s going ahead! *Mars Wreck* conventions are about the hottest cultural news around at the moment.”

“If they’re that hot, why don’t they catch fire and burn to ashes, like the Master-Brain of Mah-Zuhm?” Terry quipped. *Mars Wreck*’s Master-Brain had been his first big role, all those years ago, but it had run on for too long, he had nearly been typecast, and he was proud to have insisted on being written out irreversibly. But Line didn’t laugh at the joke, and Terry at once regretted it. Work found by AgentLine was well paid, if often demeaning, and the rent couldn’t be ignored. Line was talking of “upgrading” his client list with an influx of celebs, and necessity, grim as the Reaper, required that he be pandered to.

“If you want me to reprise the Master-Brain, to get something together for a house consisting entirely of chemistry undergrads in anoraks and false ears, I suppose I’ll have to try and remember how it went. What I meant was, this absurd idea of holding one of these congregations while they’re actually landing on Mars, looking at this Face on Mars. If anyone ever gets round to actually going there, who knows how many more delays there’ll be? Why, scientists and politicians have been holding forth about flying to Mars since Kennedy, but they never deliver!”

Line stared at him as if in amazement, then adopted the expression where the mouth was sincere but the eyes weren’t. Terry hated to be given it, though he’d borrowed it once to play a sleazy salesman in an episode of *The Bill*. “Tel, even you must know that *Wells 5* left Earth orbit last August on the main leg of its run to Mars!”

Terry shrugged. “One keeps hearing about these things going into orbit. They don’t seem to go anywhere else. One loses interest after a while. It’s all about the day after tomorrow, nirvana manana.”

“Tel, last August it was all over all the media.”

“Last August? Mark, Luv, I was at *Edinburgh!* You remember!” Terry hoped profoundly that Line did

remember. It had been a good Festival. “I hardly had time to read my own notices! I was in two Fringe things on top of *Hamlet* in the main prog, which of course you remember!”

“Of course. You were the Ghost. Anyway, you insisted on keeping May clear for Brighton Festival, but you only have Fringe stuff so for the last weekend I’ve booked you into this Mars...”

“But, Luvvie, it’s the *contacts!* You know that! You...”

“This is hotter. *Mars Wreck* is back, and Abas Thabas, the Master-Brain, is the one main character who hasn’t been seen at a WreckCon.”

“But my dear boy, I’m not a character! I’m a professional, I took the part while I was resting, oh, 20 years ago... a little more I suppose. I’m not Abas Thabas! I don’t know how to improve a brain by boiling it in oxygen...”

“And helium!” Line said sharply. “The Bottled Brains were being boiled in a mixture of oxygen and helium. There’s not much oxygen on Mars, and the Bronze Men were able to breathe it diluted with helium. You’d better make sure you brush up on things like that!”

A waiter appeared and hovered with a trolley loaded with Terry’s *boeuf bourgignon* and Mark Line’s T-bone. Terry hastily finished his *moules*, and considered. He remembered little more of *Mars Wreck* than of the episode of *Crossroads* he had appeared in as a hotel guest who couldn’t pay his bill. For some extraordinary reason, Mark Line seemed to know quite a lot about it. Perhaps he had grown up with the thing, or worse still watched it on satellite. That was exactly the kind of viewing he would go in for! Meanwhile, Line was saying: “It’s all been precisely timed. Orbit to orbit, *Wells 5* will take nine months, so it’ll get there late May this year. They’ll definitely go into Mars orbit as Ultimate WreckCon gets under way, and the lander should touch down by the end of the long weekend. It’ll be the greatest moment in history!”

Terry thought about the great moments of history: the *Oresteia* at Epidavros; the first night of *Hamlet*; his own finest hour in *Proust* at the National. Ultimate WreckCon didn’t seem quite in that category, but he knew better than to say so.

Brighton was a disappointment. Terry had a long Fringe booking in an improvisation called *Hamlet Without the Prince*. It didn’t take off. The venue had to be



cleared each evening at nine sharp to make way for comedy. This constipation of time inhibited the improvisational spirit the director had wanted, the running, living experiment in the deeper nature of the text. But at least Terry was able to stay in his sister's seaside flat and establish himself as a regular at the Festival Club. It wasn't Edinburgh, but there were contacts to be made, or at least gossip to be picked up. Sometimes the place would be half-empty, or swarming with complete wannabes, but there were exceptions.

His best contact was Cleo Marcel. Her career hadn't suffered from the end of her marriage to the Deputy Director of the National, though her skirts had got shorter and her roles a touch less classical. She had been doing more TV. Terry had known her vaguely for a long time, and last year in Edinburgh she had played Gertrude to his Ghost.

"Darling!" he welcomed. "I hear you're down to play Hedda."

"Nora. The Southern California version, would you believe! More Master Baywatch than Master Builder. Mind you, trying to get into the costumes was a good incentive, I've lost 17 and a half."

Terry noticed that for the first time in years, her top didn't reach her skirt. He said: "Perhaps you should revive your Ophelia!"

She shrugged. "That'd be greedy. Did it three times in the 80s dear – Stratford, Olivier and the Barbie. Ah, here's my new agent!"

Mark Line entered. He wore a white denim jacket and had with him an enormous young man in a muscle shirt. Line waved to a few people, accepted an offer of Tequila for himself and mineral water for his companion, then headed towards them, or rather Cleo. "Cleo, and of course Terry, this is Ray Saron, better known as Thracian." Cleo fussed over the young man while Terry stared blankly. "From *Gladiators*."

"Oh, yes... yes, of course!"

"All ready for Ultimate WreckCon, Tel? You got those tapes OK?"

"Safe and sound!" Terry had never watched a full episode of *Wreck*, and felt disinclined to start, though in the "rainy day" video pile they were above his sister's *Morse* and Ruth Rendell tapes.

Meanwhile, Cleo was saying: "Any news of the revival, Mark?"

"Yes, great news! There's a realistic budget to bring back all the favourites. One or two roles have to be recast of course... Ray here's up for Glori-Us Rux, the War Regent of the Brown Men... and this time there's a cast-iron guarantee of state-of specials."

Cleo shrugged. "I expect I'm the only person who's nostalgic for those old stringbag spaceships. At least it was realistic to think they'd crash one on Mars and wouldn't be able to get it to take off!"

The huge Thracian had been staring at Terry. He cut in: "Hey, you have to be the Terry-Tarner who was Abas Thabas, the Master's Brain. Wicked!" He shook Terry's hand, not quite as crushingly as he no doubt could have. Perhaps it was part of his training to moderate his crush. Thracian went on: "Hey, you must be really excited! Everyone wants to see how old Abas manages to get back into it!"

"By downloading himself into a fire-resistant com-

puter," Mark Line said cheerfully. "Then I expect he'll be looking for a new body to re-load into, which should be good news for you, Terry!"

Terry wished he hadn't switched from the mediocre house white to brandy quite so early. He kept resolving to stick to wine till his network was established: that kept going the way of all resolutions. Now he had to deal with a very complex situation: having braced but not prepared himself to go to some ghastly *Mars Wreck* convention, he was faced with the dreadful old thing unaccountably being revived. A series, or even a couple of episodes, would pay enough to make up for the last two years of concentrating on serious theatre work. But Line did seem to be hinting that if Terry treated the project with the contempt it deserved, some Sci-Fi device would be created to allow a less discriminating actor to take over the part of Abas Thabas. He said: "Sounds very interesting, Mark. But wasn't Mars supposed to have been blown completely into oblivion at the end of the third series?"

"*Fourth*, Terry," Line said testily, as if someone had suggested that *Hamlet* ended after the third act. "It stalled with the Viking pix showing that Mars looked as if it'd been nuked to hell. Now they've decided it was blasted intact through a quantum tunnel in the space-time continuum. It makes much more sense, if you think about it!"

"Sure does. Wicked idea!" Thracian contributed.

"Shame about that fourth series," Cleo said. "The Viking thingie floored them. But the real cult followers actually *prefer* some of the fourth-series episodes, some of the Tanith Lee scripts for instance."

This was hard for Terry to deal with. An actress who had done seven straight seasons at the National, several at the RSC, posing as a connoisseur of a bread-without-much-butter item like *Mars Wreck*, wasn't something one encountered every night at a Festival Club. He said: "That's od... interesting, Cleo! I hadn't known you were a, er..."

"A Wrecker? Well, you certainly should have, Terry! You spent two whole episodes threatening to extract my poor little brain and swap it over with the brain of the wicked Queen of the Pale Men!"

"I did?"

"Go on! You remember... mind you, your character got written out... burnt out actually! next episode, serve him right! and mine was just being built up. It was my first real role after RADA... I started out as a chainmail bikini girl, younger sister of the heroine, then the girl who played the lead, what was her name, went walk-about, and suddenly it was me strapped to a bench in your Master brain lab!"

"Was that you?" Terry said lamely. Abas Thabas had tried for the brains of several young actresses in the brief chainmail costumes worn by the Brown Martians. Most had been unmemorable refugees from mens' magazines, and surely none had played Lady Macbeth within a few seasons. "I thought we first worked together in *Mac*... you remember, the Scottish one... at the Aldwych."

"We did." Cleo said reflectively. "Everyone loved your drunken Porter. But that was certainly after *Wreck*. I did about a season and a half after you got burnt out."

"Tel!" Mark Line interrupted firmly. "You've got to do

your homework! You must have stopped watching it after you left, or you'd have known that Cleo's Glori-Ah was the main talking point, probably the main reason the fourth series got sold at all!"

Cleo interrupted: "Terry's a *classical* actor, and he's had so many roles... Anyway, the thing I really want to know is are they really going to link it all up with this real-life Martian lander?"

"Yeah!" said Thracian. "And how about this Face on Mars? Will they land where they can check it out, or is there gonna be some cover-up?"

Mark smiled knowingly. "The *scientists* say it's a trick of the light." They nodded, as if *scientists* was a synonym for politicians or spin doctors. "But it says in *On-Line Omni* that they've looked at it through the *Wells 5* onboard telescope, and they can't prove the Face is an illusion, let alone the buildings that look like a city."

"They can't prove a thing!" said Thracian emphatically. "They'd never have sent this *Wells* probe in the first place if it hadn't been for finding that microbe in the meteor!" A thought struck him. "Hey, what was it you said about something maybe going in this new series about the Scotland Yard Y-Files?"

Terry took a cab to his sister's flat at the Marina. Since her divorce had been finalized she hardly used it, preferring the pad in Bloomsbury she had squeezed out her ex. This suited Terry, who could only pay for his own place by sub-letting whenever possible. He put the *Mars Wreck* tapes on the top of the pile and played the first one. At this point, the explorers were still in orbit round Mars. They hadn't yet wrecked their lander or met the inhabitants, so Abas Thabas wasn't involved. As Terry was also supposed to mug up on general aspects of science fiction, he looked through her surprisingly big collection. Mike Ashley, Stephen Baxter, Eric Brown, Molly Brown, *A Princess of Mars* by Edgar Rice Burroughs... the names meant nothing to him. Where to start? His eyes flicked right along the shelf.

H. G. Wells! That would be appropriate! He pulled out *The Time Machine* and began to read.

Two weeks later, Terry climbed the steps of the Adelphi Hotel in Liverpool. By then he had watched most of the tapes, albeit on fast-forward for the frequent sword or raygun fights, and read some Wells. He had just finished *The War of the Worlds*. It was late on the Friday evening, but there were people at the top of the steps peering at the sky while passing round binoculars and listening to a portable radio. He recognized Thracian, who hailed him. "Hey, Terry! Isn't it exciting? It's happening right now, and in a minute we should be able to see it!"

He nodded. It seemed the safest response, as he had no idea what they were looking for. A short, bearded man next to Thracian said: "Sounds like they've got the orbit they were looking for, but we'll be lucky to see a thing before midnight. Damn streetlights!"

Thracian asked: "Do you think we'll be able to see the orbiter?"

"Not without better equipment than anyone's got here. Damn TV conventions! A real committee would've booked a hotel in the country and laid on a powerful reflector, and hang it if they didn't get so many registrations!"

Terry realized they were looking for Mars itself. "I can see Venus!" he offered. The Evening Star was unmistakable, even though the twilight was still more red than blue. No one responded, so he moved toward the hotel entrance. The bearded man fell in beside him.

"Mars should be rising about now, but we won't be able to see it for a while. I'm Dave Trickett, by the way. I don't think I know you. I'm only here 'cos there aren't any *real* SF cons till the autumn now."

Terry was almost relieved to not be recognized at this type of gathering. Even in the Adelphi foyer, there were two men dressed in astronaut uniform and a Brown Man with sword and chainmail loincloth. There were long queues, apparently for different types of registration. Before he could decide which to join, he saw Cleo heading toward him. She was already wearing her minuscule Glori-Ah outfit: her figure had if anything improved since the last tape he had watched, though she admitted the years with coats of make-up. His stomach turned over at the thought that someone might find his old costume as Abas Thabas and expect him to get into it. She came right up to him and said: "Hello! Mr Tarnar? I'm Delilah Bellaraggazza, Guest of Honour Liaison."

He had lost five pounds lately and had his hair touched up. Even so, it was reassuring to be recognized by someone so like the young Cleo. "You're... Oh! I'm new to this sort of thing! Your makeup's very good... it makes you look more like Cleo Marcel than she... well, very like her."

Delilah efficiently fast-tracked him through registration, found someone to take his bag to his room, and led the way through the huge central lounge of the hotel to the bar. She chatted as she went: "This is the *ideal* Con hotel, though we're having to use several overflows. This lounge may look a bit over the top and old-fashioned, and of course it is a teeny bit like the decor of the High Regent's Palace, but in fact it's decorated in the style of the *Titanic*!"

"Ideal for a Wreck Convention!"

"Oh, I don't think we'd thought of that. We like this lounge where *everyone* can meet up." He looked round. The *Titanic* decor was the kind which was now preserved, but two decades before it had been ripped out of pubs and used on *Mars Wreck* to indicate an ancient, decadent civilization. It was crowded. Most of the people were in everyday clothes, not too many anoraks, but there were astronauts, Brown Men (and Women, at least two more Glori-Ahs,) shrouded Pale Men, and even a huge Bronze Man, with his helmet and double swords.

He said: "I suppose you're a veteran of this sort of thing?"

"Sort of. It's my first time as G of H liaison. I'd really been hoping to meet Tanith Lee, but she isn't coming." She gave him an embarrassed look. "Of course, no one dared to hope that *you* would turn up! Everyone's so thrilled!"

They reached the bar. It was full of smoke, and he felt a cough coming on. Delilah was saying: "We made sure to arrange Real Ale!"

He felt like a brandy but decided that was a bad idea. "A pint then." At that point his throat nearly gave out. He just about held on and suppressed what would have been one of his most embarrassing coughs. "Er, do you

have any mead? Good for the throat. Actor's peccadillo!"

While Delilah was buying the drinks, the real Cleo Marcel hailed him through the crowd and the clouds of smoke. He noted with relief that she was in a conventional outfit, if anything less revealing than the one she had worn in Brighton. She moved in his direction, possibly steered by the people she was with, arrived just as he gave in to a moderate cough. He mopped his brow with a tissue, unobtrusively wiped phlegm off his mouth with the return movement.

"That does sound bad!" Delilah had returned with his beer and mead. "You should let me have a look at it!"

"It's nothing!" he said expansively. "New situation, Stage Fright! Actor's curse, but by my time of life, you train yourself to overcome it. It won't affect the weekend's... proceedings... at all."

"It *sounded* like something infectious. I'll have a look at it later, and if necessary I can write you up some antibiotics!"

Cleo glared at Delilah's hourglass version of her own younger figure. She snapped: "I thought you said you were a student!"

"Microbiology Phd," Delilah said defensively. "But I am registered as a medical doctor. It's just that as an SHO on the wards there was no time for research, let alone... other interests."

Thracian had joined then. He said: "Our Del's one of the biggest experts on *Mars Wreck*. She knows all the stats!" He paused. "Mind you, I'd say Delilah Bel-laraggazza is more like a Martian name than Gloria!"

No one laughed. Terry realized it would be *infra dig* to mock any *Mars Wreck* absurdity here. He drank his mead before his beer. It soothed his throat a little. Meanwhile, Cleo was emptying what looked like a schooner of Jerez and saying: "If you're such an expert, can you explain this. When the explorers first crash, they get told the Dark Men, the Pale Men, and what is it, the Bright Men, have all been extinct for a million years! The Brown Men and the mutants, what are they, the Bronze Men, are their combined miscegenated descendants. But as soon as they start poking around, they start finding all these lost colonies that no one's ever noticed!"

Delilah grinned shyly. "Actually, they find twelve lost races on the surface of Mars... or beneath it, of course. Four Pale Men, three Dark, two Bright, and three completely new. I think they found the Browns versus the Bronze a bit limiting after the first series."

Cleo ordered another schooner; as soon as it arrived, she said: "Of course, it's equally improbable that the lady astronauts left on the orbiting mother ship, ha ha! would then have to deal by themselves with all these hitherto unknown aliens heading for Mars or Earth!"

Delilah said defensively: "Well, it's improbable, but no one said it was *hard* science fiction. It's the way it developed series by series that's the attraction. They got a *lot* of criticism the first time for the way the women astronauts were left up there with nothing to do... that's why the aliens were brought in. And when they rediscover the Dark Men, well, it's them who're the really wise ancient race. And of course, those Dark Men were all played by black actors."

She didn't need to say that none of the Brown Men or Women had been. Terry found it hard to stop himself studying her beautiful Brown skin and wondering

if it could be dye. He decided it was too even all over her body to be an amateur make-up job, then reminded himself that in a moment of political correctness at a workshop on feminist drama, he had vowed never to ogle a woman's body unless he also respected her mind. He decided he did respect Delilah's. Meanwhile, it might be necessary to head off one of Cleo's famous "schooner moods."

He intervened: "Another glass of this delightful mead, my dear. Why don't you try one, Cleo?" Cleo maintained she only got aggressively drunk on sherry. He went on in a conciliatory voice: "I'm not sure about this throat business. I *think* it's just an actor's highly strung vocal chords, but I don't want to let all these people down! I'll leave no bottle uncorked to avoid that, even if it contains cough mixture!"

There were shushing noises. Everyone was turning towards a huge TV screen in the corner of the bar. Jem Pagman was interviewing the astronomer Pdraig Moire, saying: "So, you think they're going to land on Mars sooner rather than later?"

"Yes. They've had plenty of time to run all the checks they need on *Wells H*, the landing craft, and, using their onboard telescope and radar, on the orbiter *Wells G*, in consultation with NASA at Houston of course, to choose a suitable place to land. They seem to have already chosen a place, a level plain in the Cydonia area of Mars which is close to possible sources of fossilized Martian bacteria – which will be a very exciting discovery, of course, if they can find some fossils actually on Mars itself, rather than in a meteorite, however likely it was that that meteorite did actually originate on Mars."

Pagman said dryly: "This Cydonia area, isn't it conveniently near the so-called Face on Mars, and the City of Pyramids that's supposed to go with it?"

The director cut to a picture which amazed Terry: it appeared to be an aerial view of a gigantic sculpture or monument of a face, apparently wearing some kind of helmet, staring up from the planet's surface. The features were humanoid, but had a subtle alien feel totally unlike the caricatures on the *Mars Wreck* tapes. Nearby were building-like objects, some of which indeed looked like pyramids. Meanwhile Moire was saying: "That's a very beautiful, very convincing picture, but you know, when we get down to it, when the astronauts get down there to it, though of course it isn't the main point of the expedition, I think it's going to prove to be an illusion, a trick of light or erosion. Do we have the next... they said we would have the latest... yes, here's the latest, the very latest picture from *Wells G*'s onboard telescope."

A less impressive "Face" appeared. Moire went on: "And as you can see, as we suspected all along, the side of the face which is supposed to be in shadow, if it is a face at all which quite frankly I doubt, if it is a face it's quite badly eroded. Of course, we don't know much yet about Martian prevailing wind conditions..."

Pagman interrupted: "I can still see the pyramids."

"Well, there are pyramid-like shapes in nature, eroded pyramid-like mountains – if someone showed us a picture of the Matterhorn from space for the first time, from some directions it would look like a pyramid."

"So, you don't think there's any chance of finding a ruined alien city on Mars?"



"Well, that would take me into the territory of *Mars Wreck* and *The Y-Files*, and I think I'll leave that to them!"

At that point, Dave Trickett hurried into the bar. He shouted: "It's up! Mars is up! You can see it at damn last!"

The fans started hurrying out. Terry decided to join them. Cleo didn't, but at least that kept her away from Delilah.

There was a massive press on the steps. Someone was directing, otherwise Terry wouldn't have got out at all. People were staring upward. Terry saw that the comforting white beacon of Venus had already set, but by following the pointing hands, he saw there were a few stars visible in the East, even though there was some twilight in the rest of the sky. The brightest of the stars was very visibly red, which he now knew to be a true not metaphorical attribute of the War-God's planet. He looked at it for a long time ignoring the crowd. He realized he had never before studied something so coldly, unimaginably distant, attainable only by the greatest effort of human history. That effort had now been made, and in a tiny way, he was a part of it.

Terry didn't sleep well, but that was through excitement. To his surprise, he was enjoying himself, and he spent longer working on his speech than he had intended. He even thought of greeting the dawn, seeing if Mars was still visible, but he had nodded off by then. Delilah knocked at his door at about ten. He opened it blearily, coughed badly, as she said at once: "I couldn't wait to tell you! It's so exciting, they've landed, they've actually landed already!"

"I... it's early... Hey, that is exciting!"

"No pictures yet, but they're down safely. I brought your breakfast, your speech is still set for first thing after lunch, but you mustn't be upset if one or two people sneak in and out to look at TV monitors."

"I won't. I'll try not to." He put the breakfast tray on the table, and poured a coffee. The mere smell of it started to wake him, and he said: "Have they seen this Face thing yet? Or these pyramids?"

"No. They came in from the other way, a safer approach trajectory. They're about six miles from the pyramids."

"Should be able to see them from there."

She looked shocked, as though he had expected to see America from Liverpool. "Not on Mars. Don't forget, the horizon is closer!"

Terry felt the total alienness of the whole thing for the first time. How could a horizon be closer? Weren't they fixed? He took a sip of coffee, and remembered something vaguely, in the back of his mind, about horizons and planets, possibly from a science lesson a career and half a lifetime ago. It wasn't a clear memory. The science teachers at his school had all been total second-raters, even compared to the rest, men defeated by more interesting jobs.

Meanwhile, Delilah sat him down and insisted on examining his throat. She wrote him a prescription and said she would fetch it herself before Boots closed. Luckily, this time she was fully dressed apart from bare feet, in long blue jeans and a red sweatshirt marked *Wreck-ConNaissance*, with a picture of the Bright Men's rickety Flying Machine stretched tight over her breasts. He couldn't have predicted his reaction to being examined by Delilah dressed as Glori-Ah. Even as it was, his eyes lin-

gered too long on the Flying Machine logo. She noticed, and said: "That was from *WreckConNaissance*. It's about the best con I've been to... before this one, of course!"

Pictures had been received by the time his speech was due to start. They weren't spectacular, rather like Viking pictures, though the terrain was a bit more broken. Something was just visible in the direction where Delilah said the pyramids should be, but it could have been the tops of any range of mountains or large hills. Thracian observed significantly that the Mars Rover had already been unloaded.

Terry was the first Guest to speak. In view of the monitors and radios all over the hotel broadcasting news direct from the cold plains of Mars, he was delighted to get a nearly full house. *Mars Wreck*, he said, was really quite Shakespearean. The astronauts were like Hamlet, asking questions to which they didn't always want the answers, trapped in their situation by the nobility of their compulsions. The Brown Men were collectively like Ariel, and the Bronze Men obviously Caliban. Glori-Ah's sister, with her doomed romance with the High Wing of the Bright Men, was Juliet or perhaps Cleopatra, while Glori-Ah herself, with her successful interplanetary courtship of the hitherto token black astronaut, was Rosalind or Miranda with a touch of Portia. As for Abas Thabas, though there was an element of Shylock, he felt a deeper analysis of the character indicated he was more like Prospero. As for whether he really meant to break his staff and drown his book... Terry paused. He had noticed Mark Line in a middle row with two men he suspected were the producers of the proposed revival. He hoped the audience, who had been enthusiastic so far, would insist that he do neither; that they would loudly demand he reprise the role of Abas Thabas throughout the new series.

Terry began to panic. He had lost the audience. They were whispering wildly among themselves. It was like the Wave: whispers were spreading through the crowd from both entrances and people were rushing out as soon as they heard whatever it was. When about half were left, Dave Trickett hissed at the stage in a voice between a whisper and a shout: "Big news! Better suspend the session! Big news!"

Dave followed the others out. Someone switched on a monitor in a corner of the room. Terry didn't know what to think. He sat gathering his notes, looking for Line's group. They too were sweeping out. He realized he too was feeling excited – the most since... he didn't know when. His first professional appearance, probably.

There was a crowd at the monitor which had just been switched on. Delilah was at the front, listening to an earpiece. Suddenly she began jumping up and down, shouting: "They've found it! They've found it!"

He pushed through the crowd towards her. "What, the Face? The pyramid city?"

"No, *life*! Well, evidence of life... microbes, fossil microbes, lots of them... it seems they're *much* bigger than the ones in the meteorite! They may be *multi-cellular*, and they're recent fossils... He's saying somewhere on Mars, some of these things could still be alive!"

He said: "Alive... microbes? Like... bacteria?"

"A bit bigger than that... possibly a lot more complex. Like tiny trilobites, the man says. Ohhh! Multi-cellu-

lar life!"

Terry turned away and headed for the bar. There, he found Mark Line with Thracian, who asked: "How'd the talk go?"

"Brill!" Mark enthused. "At least till the big news interrupted it. I think Terry's loaded himself back down into the next series!"

Terry slumped onto a barstool and ordered a large brandy. "I don't know... big news, eh? They set out to find pyramids, and now they're enthusing over microbes."

"Tel!" Mark slapped him on the shoulder. "We'll make a sci-fan of you yet. Microbes was what they set out to find!"

Thracian added: "And they still haven't reported from that Rover!"

That evening a Masquerade competition was scheduled. Lots of people were in costume, but as the judges were glued to the monitors, they could only wander round and show off to the crowd in the bar and the lounge. A jukebox kept playing Bowie's "Is there Life on Mars?", punctuated by choruses of "YEAH!" from the crowd. Delilah had not changed back into costume, having spent the whole afternoon hanging on every word from space. She periodically rushed to the bar to order a pint of Old Peculiar, and eventually dragged Terry to a monitor. "Look! The first picture of a Martian! You can see it's *very* like a Trilobite!"

"Yes." Terry hadn't had time to find out what a trilobite was.

Delilah was burbling on: "You can see the main lobe clearly, then there at the top one of the others, then the one at the bottom isn't quite so clear but it's there. Let's hope we get computer enhancements soon! Then see, there's what could be a little mouth on the left, a back ridge, it's not clear what those marks are..."

Terry found Delilah's excitement hard to share, but tried to take it seriously. After all, the antibiotics she had prescribed seemed already to have worked on his throat infection. "So this is a different *kind* of microbe from the one in the meteor. Why is it more exciting?"

"Just think laterally, scientifically. We've multiplied our estimate of what life Mars might support a hundred times! Might *still* support!"

Terry stared at the picture. Something about it disturbed him. He tried to think laterally. The nearest he'd come to scientific knowledge about Mars and microbes came from what he'd just read in *The War of the Worlds*, and he didn't think that was the science Delilah meant.

Suddenly, the music changed: Bowie stopped at last, and "Stay" by Shakespeare's Sister boomed through the room. Terry knew the song; it was about some kind of alien queen. All the conversation stopped as Cleo Marcel entered, wearing what had to be the costume for the new, more mature Glori-Ah. It was slightly less revealing than the original, and had better jewels and a much bigger, more regal tiara. A round of applause broke out as Cleo strode majestically to the bar. Terry remembered that her outfit as Cleopatra at Stratford had been similar, the definitive performance. Cleo sat next to Thracian, nodded to Terry, even managed a smile for the outshone Delilah in her red sweatshirt.

Dave Trickett entered with special editions of some

newspaper and started to scatter them. There was a full-colour picture of the Martian trilobite on the front. Terry picked a copy up and stared at it uneasily. Think laterally, he told himself.

The room was buzzing with excitement. Delilah had finished her drink already, leaned against him, and offered to buy him one. "A pint, no a half, of what you just had. I want to think laterally half-sober." Also, it was a long time since a fan as attractive as this one, any fan, had leaned like that, and he wanted to avoid the fate of Falstaff.

The voices around him rose excitedly, till someone, he thought Trickett, yelled: "SHUT UP! This is IMPORTANT!"

A voice was coming from the monitors. It was a distant, crackly, astronaut voice. There were no pictures for this one. The voice was saying: "Houston, we've completed our first circuit of the city on the Rover. And I think it might just be a city. The dimensions are very regular, I don't think it's natural but we can't be sure. Everything's very worn and eroded, nothing left you can be totally certain about.

"Houston, we've now left the possible city and are proceeding towards the object referred to as the Face. We can't see much of it yet. There's a lot of erosion there as well, more on the side we think of as in shadow. There's some evidence that the wind blows sand onto that side, but it'd have to have blown for a damn long time..." The crackling rose, and so after a few minutes did the voices in the bar, till someone again shouted: "SHUT UP!"

Padraig Moire could be heard saying: "...still no real evidence that this is a *human* face, despite very interesting accounts of preliminary evidence of very interesting regularities in unusual rock formations..."

Another voice from the monitor said: "Hold on Pat, I think we can go back to Houston..."

There came the astronaut's faint crackle again: "Houston, the large pyramids are very old, very dead. There are huge cracks, no sign of anything like maintenance. If anything did live in there, it's dead now, been dead a long time. What we have directly ahead is three very much smaller pyramids, close to the Face object. The Face is looming above us, and just outside its shadow are the three small pyramids. They're in pretty poor shape too, but maybe a bit less eroded than the big ones. Yes, a bit less eroded. One or two deep cracks... I think they're dead too, but more recently. It's as if most of the population died, they had no need for their big pyramids, they abandoned them and moved over here to these smaller ones, maybe to be near the Face, maybe to work on it. Maybe to build it... God it's *vast*, this wasn't anything... maybe... yes, that's it, maybe it's a memorial... Yes, the survivors built it, they built it as a memorial to an entire race!"

The crackles resumed, and after a while Padraig Moire could be heard saying: "... even if it is artificial, if this artefact is as old as they imply, of course that doesn't mean it has to be a human face, that would be yet another coincidence and I have to say that as yet we don't know *what* is coincidence..." A voice announced that it was getting late on Mars and the Rover was returning to its base, the *Wells H* lander. Conversation

resumed. Thracian said: "Bet there's something been reported they don't want us to hear!"

"No!" Delilah said. "It's late and they're going to the Lander. It's insulated for very cold Martian nights. The Rover isn't."

"So! Supposedly they can't go very far, or they don't have to tell us if they do!" Thracian was absorbed in this conversation with Delilah, but Terry was staring at the picture of the "trilobite" in the newspaper. He was trying to think laterally and not think about *The War of the Worlds*, but he couldn't separate the two. He started turning the picture, then he stopped with it on one side, and said:

"What if it isn't a memorial? What if it's a warning?"

Thracian nodded. "Could be." He thought for a minute. "What of?"

"What if they're all right? If it isn't artificial and it isn't a face? Look, if you turn the trilobite on its end, doesn't it look a bit like, not a face, but *the* Face? What Delilah said were the outer bits, lobes, of the trilobite are what we've been thinking of as the cheek-pieces of the helmet. What if this microbe is what wiped them out? This was the survivors' way of... trying to warn whoever turned up?"

"Bloody Hell!" Thracian whistled. "Decontamination on this mission had better be bloody good. If they get back at all that is!"

"What an incredible theory!" Delilah exclaimed. She threw her arms round Terry and kissed him. "What a lateral man! Still, I don't suppose there's too much need to worry. It's most unlikely we on Earth could be harmed by Martian diseases, if there are any left."

"What on Earth... or Mars... makes you think that?"

"They just... wouldn't have evolved to interact at all with Earth life. Nor us with them. I've written an article about it for *Science Fiction Backgrounds*. It's a zine about the real science behind real SF. I'll fetch a copy for you to read."

Terry hesitated. He could see the implications of his theory without getting bogged down in an article by a "real" microbiologist. That sort of thing always gave him a kind of scientific stage fright. He said: "Hold on. The implications of this are terrifying. It's an unknown microbe, this whole thing is the Unknown, it could do anything. Those poor fellows up there on the lander... why yes, they *could* be contaminated! This certainly would be the biggest thing in history if that happens! God knows if they'll even be allowed to come back!"

"Scientifically, it's just so unlikely." Delilah jumped to her feet and tugged at Terry's sleeve. Half-drunk on excitement and strong beer, she managed to tug and lean against him at the same time. "Come on. I've got a copy of the article in my room. Let's go and get it."

"Clever girl!" Cleo stretched out one long bare leg and approvingly caressed Delilah's hip with the toe of her jewelled sandal. At the same time, she wrapped herself sinuously round Thracian, slipping a hand under his muscle shirt. "Here's a tip. Terry used to have a rep as the best cunnilinguist in London. Bet you've always wanted to spend a night under one of the stars of *Mars Wreck*!"

She found the article, but Terry had remembered that he had once been a skilled seducer, had recently lost weight, and was about to re-visit the triumphs of his

youth. They made love with the light on. It was clear that Delilah's Glori-Ah tan was not make-up, and Terry wanted to admire it: it had apparently cost her three weeks of solid sunbeds.

Later she went to sleep with the light still burning, but Terry lay awake. Nothing like Delilah had happened to him for many years. Nothing like this Mars weekend had ever happened before. He wondered about his theory of the Face, about how he could check it out. He knew so little science!

He lay there and wondered if this unexpected romance would continue. He dared to hope it would. She had a sharp, trained mind, of a kind he seldom encountered. *Mars Wreck*, of which he had been quietly ashamed, had for once literally bridged a gulf between worlds. But he realized that a lot of his favourite conversation consisted in essence of skilled bluster, and Delilah wouldn't be held by that for long.

Eventually, he made up his mind. He had the motivation for a dramatic character development in his own character. He found the scientific article which had been Delilah's original reason for bringing him to her room. Hesitantly, he began to read.

On Mars that weekend, mankind had taken the most gigantic leap in history. Meanwhile, in a Liverpool hotel room, one man was taking a small but still significant step.

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**Peter T. Garratt's** most popular previous stories for *Interzone* include "The Collectivization of Transylvania" (issue 81), "The Hooded Man" (issue 104) and "The Inauguration" (issue 115). He lives in Brighton, and sometimes represents this magazine at sf conventions.

## InterZone

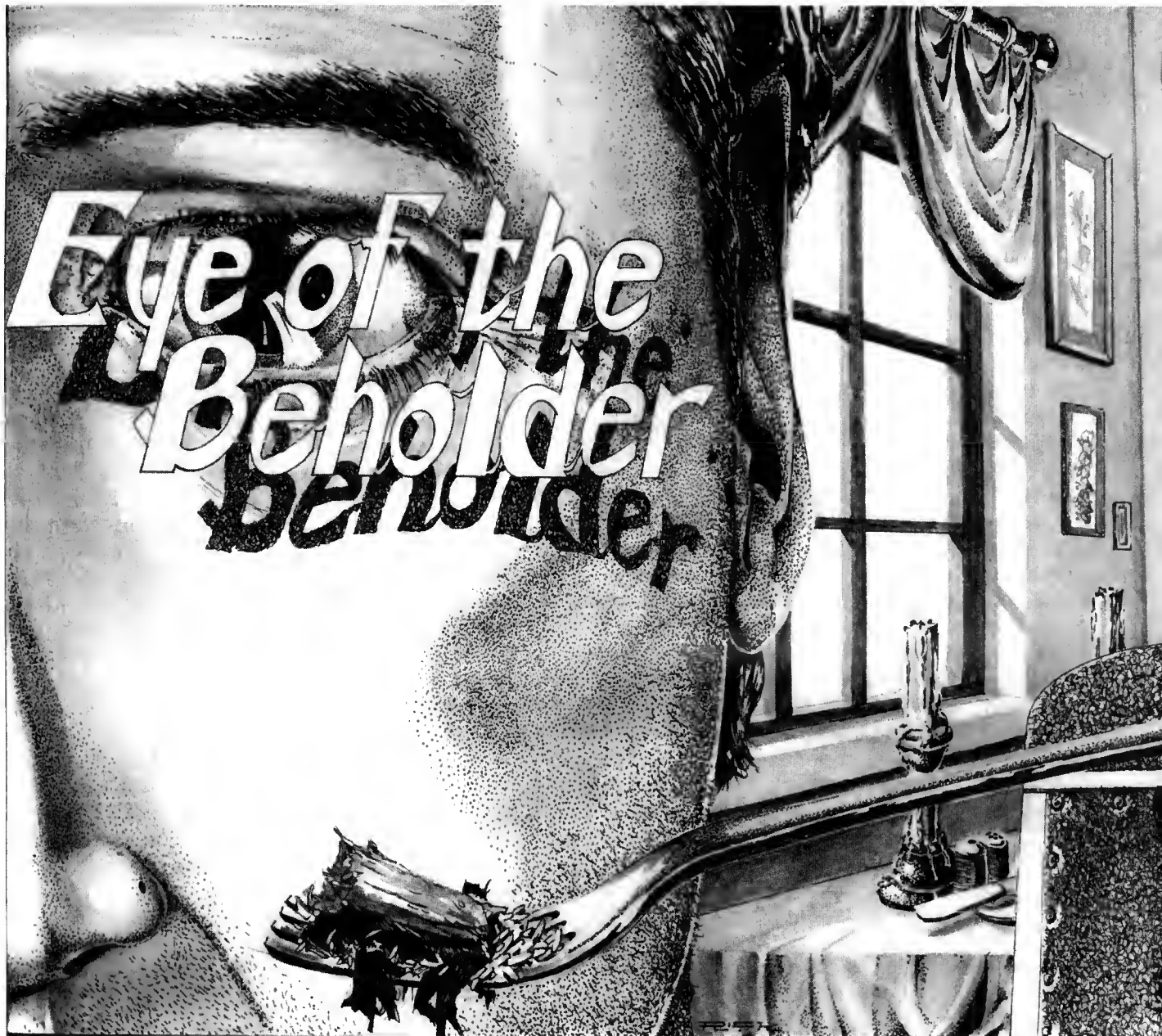
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Miller sat at his desk and stared through the window at the gentle contours of Hampstead Heath. He considered the fact of the city beyond, the teeming millions packed into so little space. There had been a time, not so long ago, when the population of the capital, the sheer press of humanity, had filled him with claustrophobia. He smiled to himself now at the irony of the notion.

He picked up his pen and completed the entry in his journal. "So I have no rational explanation for what is happening to me. It has crossed my mind more than once that I am going mad – or maybe that I am already mad."

He paused there, staring out at the playground that abutted the heath. Swings described precise arcs against a background of tarmac and daffodils. The roundabout turned slowly, as if moved by the wind.

"And yet," he wrote, "I cannot accept this. Madness is no explanation. What has befallen me is not, I am sure, the result of some unique mental aberration, some dysfunction on a neurological level. What is happening *must* have an external cause. It is the world out there that has gone mad, not me." He paused again, then added: "But isn't that what all madmen claim?"

He closed his journal. Beside him on the desk, the

screen of his PC glowed a multi-coloured invitation to start work. He had two chapters of a children's novel to complete before the weekend, four days away. He told himself that he could do the 5,000 words in a day. He would begin tomorrow, take today off. In six months he had completed three short novels – losing himself in the fantasy worlds of his creation as if in a desperate bid to deny what was happening out there in the real world.

Despite the dangers of venturing out during the daylight hours, Miller decided that this morning he would go for a walk. The alternative, to remain inside and either read or watch a film, reminding himself of the world as it had once been, did not appeal to him. He would only brood if he remained at home – at least outdoors, even though he would be surrounded by reminders of the phenomenon, he would be able to gain satisfaction from the catharsis of exercise.

He found his dark glasses and moved into the hall. From the umbrella stand by the door he pulled his white stick. He opened the door and stepped outside, met by the fragrance of roses. He left the house and moved carefully down the street, staring straight ahead and tapping his cane on the pavement before him. He would call in at the newsagents for a paper, the deli for



Illustrations by Rick Dawson

rye bread and cheese, and then circle around to the heath and walk for a mile or two to give himself an appetite for lunch.

He kept to the centre of the pavement, moving slowly and continually steeling himself for the impact. The danger was not so much one of other people's bumping into him, but of his colliding with them. At least, with this disguise, he had a ready excuse.

He had often wondered, before the catastrophe had befallen him, what it might be like to be blind. He had considered writing a novel from the point of view of a young blind boy – but something had stopped him, some notion that he was trespassing on territory he did not fully understand and therefore could not convincingly portray. Now he thought he understood the affliction a little better.

Although he was not technically blind, there were certain things that he could not see. Did that qualify him to enter the land of the blind, or at least write on their behalf? He smiled to himself... He remembered the adage that in the land of the blind, the one-eyed man was king. Did that make him, with two perfectly good eyes, an uncrowned monarch? Could he write a novel

about his singular blindness? Would he be believed?

He stopped, staring along the deserted street, feeling angry with himself. No! No, it was not a blindness, he told himself, it was not something wrong with him – but something terribly askew with the world.

He bought a copy of the *Times*, then walked with exaggerated care to the delicatessen. He stood by the counter, waited until he heard the girl's bright, "Can I help you?" before he asked for a loaf of rye and a quarter each of Stilton and Gorgonzola. To maintain his guise, he had to be careful and ignore the impulse to fetch for himself the items he could see.

A plastic bag appeared on the counter before him, and he held out a five-pound note. He watched it disappear from his fingers, to be replaced seconds later by a few coins. The transaction successfully accomplished, he left the shop and walked to the heath.

He was squeezing through the narrow iron swing gate when his stick came up against something. He had been moving with unaccustomed alacrity, eager to reach the heath, and could not stop himself in time. He hit someone, staggered and fell to his knees.

"Oh! I am sorry! Please... Forgive me – miles away." He heard a woman's voice, the vowels rounded with

Home-Counties enunciation.

He climbed to his feet. "I'm fine, really. It's okay – a little fall."

She touched his elbow, and he was aware of her fragrance, and the heady rush of it almost brought tears to his eyes. *Mystique*...

He turned and hurried away. As he paced from the heath he heard the woman's concerned enquiry. "I'm so very sorry. Are you sure you are all right?"

He made his way home, all thoughts of a walk forgotten as a consequence of the encounter. The mock Tudor facade of his detached house offered blessed sanctuary.

Once inside he deposited the bag, threw off his glasses and collapsed into a chair by the window overlooking the back garden and the orderly rows of vegetables.

He wondered what it was about the encounter that had caused him such distress: the touch of the woman's soft hand, or the smell of her perfume?

If he were honest with himself, he knew it was the *Mystique*, and the memories it evoked.

Six years ago, at the age of 32, Miller had had his first real relationship with a woman – "real" in that it not only involved sex, itself a traumatic first-time experience for him, but also called for a reciprocation of emotions like care and concern, which he found even harder to come to terms with.

He had met Laura at a small party to celebrate the BBC production of one of his books. She had worked in the design department of his publishers, Flynn and Moran, and they had been introduced by his editor as the party was winding down. Miller had wanted nothing more than to get away from the chattering crowd, and the thought of having to amuse this small, rather attractive but painfully shy woman had not appealed. He recalled talking at length, about himself, while getting steadily more pissed on the bottle of cheap white wine he had liberated for his own consumption. He had no recollection of saying goodbye or of getting home. A situation, he told himself next morning, par for the course on the few occasions that he did venture out.

Laura had phoned a few days later, murmuring – she had always seemed to murmur, as if to speak aloud might offend – that she had enjoyed his latest book, enjoyed talking to him and perhaps... well, maybe they could meet for a drink some time – if it was convenient for him, of course...?

He had often since wondered what had made him say, "Why, yes. Yes, that would be nice."

He had had one other abortive relationship, in his early 20s, and the degree of emotional commitment required of him, the paradoxical desire and at the same time loathing he had felt for the woman, had made him eschew even the thought of ever becoming involved again.

He had lost himself in his work, seen a couple of friends once a month, and told himself that he was reasonably content.

He had long since reconciled himself to the life of a bachelor. He gave thanks that his sex drive was inordinately low, so that his enforced celibacy did not provoke urges that might have been seen as perverse. He had got on with his life of work, the occasional talk at a school and trips to the theatre.

Perhaps in acceding to Laura's invitation, some

buried part of him had wished for something more, something better, than the cloistered existence he had come to accept.

They had seen each other for almost a year. At first he was attracted to the idea of being seen with this young, pretty girl, enamoured with the notion of being in love. But as he came to know her, to understand that beneath the prettiness cowered someone with all the emotional maturity of a schoolgirl, he came to realize that he felt nothing at all for this lost soul. It was an indication of his own immaturity that he had been unable to bring himself to hurt her by telling her that their affair was over.

As the months passed, and her emotional dependence on him conversely matched his increasing detachment from her, he found himself loathing Laura and himself in equal measure. He realized that to relate to another human being was to hold a mirror up to your soul, a mirror that reflected back at you all your emotional shortcomings, personal foibles and faults of character. He wished to end the affair, draw a dark veil over the mirror.

He avoided her. He would not call at her flat for weeks, would not answer when she phoned. He even pretended to be out when she came round to his house and rang the door-bell for hours on end.

To her eternal credit, and his own debit on the scale of personal decency, it was Laura who had had the courage to end the affair.

She must have followed him home from the city, for as he was closing the door she burst in and confronted him in the twilight of the hall.

"You bastard!" she wept, and both the epithet and the volume of the cry shamed Miller.

"Shall we have a coffee?" he said.

"I don't want a coffee! I want... I thought – I thought we were... I was so happy with you. Don't you understand that? What went wrong? What did I do?"

And he had tried to calm her, assure her that the fault was not hers, that he was wholly to blame. He opened up, for the first time since he had known her, and told her that he had never, in all his life, felt affection for another human being. He recalled a line he used, which caused him to redden in shame even now, "The closest I've ever come to understanding and feeling for another human is in one of my books."

They had talked for over an hour, shuttling the same old, worn-out and repeated dialogue back and forth, Miller trying to come to some ultimate distillation of meaning through repetition and rephrasing, much as he might rewrite a line of fiction a dozen times before getting it right.

Laura went through periods of lucidity, when she detailed her emotions, laid herself bare for his inspection: pleading for his love, if not his love then his affection, even his friendship and company. When this elicited little response from him, she would weep and plead, and then yell with a rage that was shocking to behold.

At last, in silence, they faced each other.

Laura shook her head. "I thought I loved you. I really did. But I was mistaken." She was speaking *sotto voce*, her natural mode of delivery. She was herself again. "I could never love anyone as cold and unfeeling as you. You're empty, you're cold and unfeeling and empty..."



She had turned and opened the door, pausing on the threshold to look back at him. "I've never met anyone who doesn't need other people... and then I met you."

And she had walked from the house, walked from his life, and following the initial sense of release – the realization that no longer would he have to confront Laura and so admit to the failings she had so accurately catalogued – he experienced a despair at the fact of who he was, and how he had become like this.

That had been six years ago, and for that long he had managed to insulate himself, to forget the woman who had made him admit to the emptiness at the core of his being.

Then today he encountered the woman on the heath, experienced her soft touch and the scent of *Mystique*, Laura's perfume.

Miller noticed, on the far side of the room, the winking red light of the answer phone. He crossed to it and stabbed the play button. "Miller, m'dear!" the megaphone baritone of Selwyn Rees, his agent, set up a vibration in the plastic housing of the device. "I'm ringing at 11.30 – why the hell aren't you pounding away on that bloody machine of yours! Look, something's come up. You've been bloody hard to catch of late, so be a pal and meet me at Harrington's at one, okay? See you then."

Miller walked to the window and stared out. For six months he had avoided all his usual contacts, putting off meeting Selwyn and his editors and conducting business by phone. Now the thought of meeting Selwyn for lunch appealed to him; oddly, Miller liked his agent's larger-than-life, back-slapping *joie de vivre*. It would be the first time since it had happened that he had met any of his old acquaintances: he would have to think up some story to excuse his "blindness."

He phoned for a taxi and 15 minutes later found his glasses and stick and stepped out into the street.

This was the first occasion in six months that he had travelled further afield than his own street and the heath. As the taxi carried him through the deserted streets of Highgate and Belsize Park, Miller thought back to the morning of that first fateful day.

He had awoken at seven, as usual, showered, dressed and breakfasted while half-listening to the news on Radio Four. He had thought nothing of the fact that there was no sign of the usual procession of commuters on the street outside his house – only later did it occur to him that he should have noticed the onset of the phenomenon then.

He had climbed to the second floor and his study, meaning to get down to work on the latest book. His usual working method was to compose his thoughts while staring through the window for half an hour before putting fingers to keyboard.

This morning, as he stared out, he became increasingly aware that something was very wrong.

The paths that traversed the heath were deserted – which was perhaps not so unusual at this hour. But the playground, usually busy with children during the school holidays, and bored *au pairs* with push-chairs, was also deserted.

Then Miller noticed that there were indeed a couple of push-chairs parked on the gravel path that sur-

rounded the playground, and he felt a stab of alarm that they seemed to be unattended.

Then, as he watched, one of the buggies, seemingly of its own volition, turned and scooted off down the path, soon disappearing from sight through the gate. He experienced a sudden dizziness that sometimes affects the senses when the brain is forced to deal with an optical illusion.

Then he became aware of more of these visual impossibilities: a rain shower had started, and a multi-coloured host of umbrellas bobbed through the air – with not a soul beneath them. A dog trotted along the path, attached to a lead but without its owner, a surreal take on those mime artists who walk invisible dogs on stiff leads. As he stared more closely at the heath, he saw the grass darken in the shape of footprints as invisible citizens took their morning walks.

Miller hurried downstairs and stared through the front window. He felt an immediate relief to see cars and vans passing down the street – then was overcome with a stomach-churning nausea when he saw that the vehicles were empty. Brief-cases and shopping bags swung through short, impossible arcs a metre off the ground. A carrier full of milk bottles shot down the neighbouring drive.

Shaken, he made his way outside. He stood in the middle of the pavement, staring up and down the deserted street, normally at this hour thronged with people making their hurried way to work. For as far as the eye could see, the street was deserted – as empty as a stage set for some end-of-the-world film – but dotted with tell-tale signs that people still existed: the floating bags and folded newspapers, the occasional push-chair.

A disembodied voice sounded close by: "Excuse me, please." And another: "Do you mind?" He must have presented an unusual sight to passers-by, as he turned this way and that, his arms held up in a gesture of amazement and mute appeal.

He took a few paces along the street, brought up short as he collided with the solid bulk of a man who growled: "What the hell? What do you think?"

Off balance, Miller fell to his knees. He reached out instinctively – grabbed a leg. A woman screamed, pulled herself away. The sensation of touching someone he could not see was at once bizarre and terrifying.

He felt rough hands on his arms, dragging him to his feet. "What do you think you're up to?" someone said in his ear.

"I'm sorry, awfully sorry. Migraine. Terrible migraine..."

He indicated his front gate. "If you could just assist me..."

Invisible hands steered him onto his garden path, released him. His heart pounding, bile rising in his throat, Miller staggered back to the house and lay on the settee in the front room, trying to make some sense of what was happening to him.

One hour later he stood and crossed to the window, staring out with a sense of dread. Even as he told himself that what he had experienced earlier might have been some temporary hallucination, he knew what he would see. And sure enough: driverless cars motored down the street, dogs trotted by on ridiculously rigid leads.

He phoned Selwyn. His agent's baritone boomed in

his ear, reassuring him that all was well with the world. "Miller! This is a surprise. How can I help you, m'dear?"

"Ah.... Just a social call, Selwyn. How are things?"

"Things?" Selwyn shouted, non-plussed. "What do you mean, things?"

"Look out of your window, Selwyn."

"Eh?"

"Do it, just for me. What do you see?"

After a moment's silence: "People, Miller. Millions of bloody people. What's all this about?"

Miller replaced the receiver without replying.

He remained indoors for three days, each morning checking to see if the world had returned to normal, only to find that the strange phenomenon still maintained. It seemed that the world out there was still functioning as it always had: he monitored the news on radio and television, and if anyone else had been afflicted with this strange... *malaise*... then no mention of it was made.

On the fourth day he realized that he would have to venture out for food and other provisions. For fear of repeating his mistake of the first day and colliding with innocent passers-by, it occurred to him that in the guise of a blind man he would be able to walk the streets in relative safety. People would avoid him, and he would have an excuse in the event of accidental collisions.

His life slipped into a manageable routine. He avoided his acquaintances in the writing world, turned down invitations to talk at libraries and schools, and made excuses when invited to the theatre.

His only visual link with his fellow humans was through the medium of live television, where he could paradoxically view people – presenters, pedestrians, athletes – without hindrance. As the weeks passed, he almost came to accept the fact of his strange condition.

Of late, though, he had been much given to wondering if what was happening was the result of some external factor, or some malfunction in his own sensory awareness. He could supply no explanation as to what might have happened to the world to make its citizens invisible to him alone, but nor could he bring himself to accept the alternative: that the aberration was within him, that, in other words, he was going mad.

Miller sat back in the padded seat of the taxi, the driver invisible and the steering wheel turning as if by remote control, and watched the empty world pass by outside.

They turned into Upper St Martin's Lane. The taxi came to a halt, caught in the snarl of bumper-to-bumper traffic contrasting with the deserted pavements. It was a strange enough sight to see the streets of Hampstead and Highgate emptied, but Miller stared, his amazement renewed, at the fact of central London cleared of all its citizens. The city had about it a Sunday morning deadness. Here and there, as he stared through the window, he caught the surreal image of hamburgers and hot dogs disappearing down invisible throats, newspapers hanging open in the air like details from a canvas by Magritte.

The taxi halted outside Harrington's, his agent's unofficial office. Miller paid the driver and stepped out carefully, tapping his way across the pavement with his stick. He made it to the door of the restaurant without mishap and pushed inside.

A muted babble of conversation greeted him from a seemingly empty room: the effect was disconcerting, as if a film soundtrack had been dubbed onto the wrong scene.

Then Miller noticed the small signals that belied the emptiness of the restaurant. Knives and forks worked in precise, deliberate rhythms, the movements of the knives economical, used to cut and then laid aside, those of the forks more lavish as they were lifted from plate to mouth and back again. Miller found the trajectory of the assembled silverware mesmerizing – something that, when the world had been normal, he had never really noticed.

A dessert trolley trundled across the room. Trays of food, held at head height, floated through the swing doors from the kitchen to their destinations.

Then he heard: "Miller? Good God, man! Miller, is it you?"

The conversation modulated. He imagined heads turned his way. The voice sounded again, closer this time. "Miller – what happened, for God's sake?"

He felt Selwyn's meaty grip on his forearm. He was drawn across the restaurant to the booth which over the years his agent had made his own.

Selwyn, with the misplaced solicitude of the sighted for the blind, manhandled Miller into his seat. He resumed his own seat opposite: Miller saw the plush velvet of the backrest dimple. "Out with it, man! What the hell happened? Why didn't you tell me?"

Miller shook his head, less concerned by the question than by the strange phenomenon of the disembodied baritone. For the ten years that Selwyn Rees had acted as his agent, the big Welshman had been a whole entity, a physical presence – six feet tall, built like a prop-forward, ruddy-faced – and now Miller found it almost impossible to relate to Selwyn reduced as he was to merely a voice.

He shrugged. "Just last week," he said, relaying the story he'd rehearsed in the taxi. "I fell down the stairs. Concussed myself. When I came to..." He shrugged. "The specialists say that my sight might return – they're still running tests."

Selwyn's brandy glass rose; a goodly quantity of the amber liquid disappeared down his gullet. "God, I don't know what to say. What about work?"

Miller smiled. "Don't worry, Selwyn. I'm still writing."

"Thank God for that. Hell, this has come as something of a shock."

They ordered lunch, Miller selecting steak-and-kidney pie with new potatoes from the menu which Selwyn read out. He ordered a bottle of house white, then said: "You mentioned that something had come up?"

Selwyn's brandy glass bobbed in an acknowledging gesture. "Sorry to dump bad news on you like this, Miller. Bloody Worley and Greenwood – they've reneged on the contract for the third Kid Larsen book. Payment in full, of course – but they won't be publishing the book. 'Present financial climate' and all that crap."

"Any chance of placing the third elsewhere?" Miller asked. He had to stop himself from smiling at the charade of addressing a seemingly empty room.

"Think about it, man. If you were a publisher, would you touch the third book in a trilogy that wasn't selling that well?"

"Touché."

Their meals arrived. Miller watched the plates slide across the restaurant as if by a miracle of anti-gravity. He heard the waiter murmur that the plates were hot. Selwyn tucked into his sirloin with gusto, knife and fork working like pistons.

They discussed the state of the country – for about three minutes – before conversation returned, as ever, to the small world of publishing. Miller caught up on the gossip he'd missed out on over the months, nodded absently as Selwyn recounted the merry-go-round of editorial sackings and appointments.

They were sipping coffee when Miller said, "I've almost finished the latest, so I'd appreciate it if you'd look out for more of the usual." Meaning the hackwork with which he filled the weeks between his own work.

His words were greeted with a lengthy silence.

At last Selwyn said: "Miller – I don't usually hand out advice. You're a pro, you know what you're doing. But—" A pause. "Look – how about slowing down? Being a bit more... how should I put it? Selective. I know it's none of my business – and tell me to keep my bloody nose out if you disagree – but do you really need all this hackwork? Slow down. Take more time over the big projects. A couple of your latest books have been bloody good – and you know me, I don't hand out compliments lightly."

Miller nodded. "I appreciate your concern. You know how I like to work – I can't stop, and I work hard even on the rubbish—"

"I know you do. And it's appreciated – you don't know how glad editors are to have more than just a competent job handed in. But... between you and me, you're better than all that stuff." The coffee cup tipped at lip-level. "Okay. Sermon over. I've said enough."

At that second, movement flashed on the periphery of Miller's vision.

He turned his head in time to see – to his utter amazement – the quick figure of a young woman dash past a table on the far side of the room. It happened so fast that only after seconds, when the girl had disappeared through the door, did it come to him that he had seen, for the first time in six months, actually *seen* another human being... In retrospect, he told himself that the girl had even paused in her escape from the restaurant, stopped briefly and looked across the room at him – but the more he considered the episode, the more he told himself that it had been nothing other than the effects of too much white wine.

Selwyn was saying, "Well... I suppose duty calls—"

"Did you see anything just then?" Miller said. "I mean... I thought I heard... I don't know. Did someone just run through...?" He trailed off, realizing how ridiculous he was sounding.

"You must be hearing things, Miller. Now, the bill. This is on me, and no protests."

Five minutes later Selwyn escorted Miller from the restaurant and insisted on finding him a taxi. As he was carried home through the London streets jammed with traffic but devoid of people, Miller sat back and considered what he had seen in the restaurant – if, indeed, he had seen anything at all.

Over the next few days Miller lost himself in finishing the last two chapters of the novel and beginning the sec-



ond draft. When he considered the episode in Harrington's, he told himself that a combination of drunkenness and some desire of his subconscious had conjured the apparition of the young woman. He concentrated on his work, immersing himself in the reality of his fiction that was more real than the world outside. His life slipped into a comfortable routine of writing, eating, and strolling across the heath at sunset.

Then, just as he had succeeded in convincing himself that the woman had been nothing more than a phantom of his imagination, he thought he saw her again.

He was emerging from the deli with provisions for the next day or two when he caught a flash of white from the corner of his eye. He turned quickly, looking across the road. He could have sworn that he glimpsed the girl's slight figure dash behind the hedge of the house opposite. He moved to the edge of the pavement, staring. His manner must have appeared odd to anyone nearby – a blind man staring intently at something on the other side of the road.

Through the foliage of the hedge, he made out a fractured pattern of white material and brown skin as the girl ran away down the side of the house and out of sight.

Paradoxically, far from convincing him of the girl's physical reality, the sighting only served to convince him further that she was the product of his own subconscious: something about her elusiveness suggested that she was a figment, like the beguiling Sirens that down the years had called to him in his dreams, only to disappear with terrible, tragic finality upon his approach.

That night, after describing his sighting of the girl, Miller wrote in his journal: "There are two possibilities, of course. Either she exists in reality, or in my imagination. The latter possibility is less worrying – the thought that she is a product of my frustrated libido is one with which I can cope, as I have coped with similar frustrations over the years. The former possibility, that she really exists out there... this throws up a series of worrying questions. Why is she the only human being I can see? Is she following me – as the two sightings in different parts of London tend to suggest – and, if so, why? What could she want with me? I have to admit that over the months I have come to some psychological accommodation with what is happening. The advent of the girl upon the scene would serve only to confuse matters."

Miller finished the second draft of the novel, taking time to hone it to his satisfaction before sending it off to Selwyn. A week after dining with his agent, he parcelled up the manuscript and posted it as he made his way to the heath.

It was a perfect summer's afternoon, the sky clear and blue and the heat of the day tempered by a cooling breeze. Miller sat on a bench, first ensuring that it was unoccupied, and stared across the eerily deserted heath. There was evidence that the citizens of London were taking the opportunity to enjoy the clement weather: kites dipped and jinked through the air at the command of invisible controllers; ubiquitous dogs trotted, as if pushed along, at the end of straightened leads; a fleet of empty push-chairs careered crazily across the heath like remote-controlled toys.

The murmured conversation of the unseeable citizens eddied around him, rising and falling as they approached, came alongside him, and passed away.

The girl appeared, suddenly, on the crest of a small hill about 50 yards before Miller. There could be no denying, now, the reality of her existence. The fact of her physical presence, in all the emptiness around her, struck Miller with breathtaking force. She wore a simple, short white dress and a pair of soiled pink leggings. Her long black hair whipped around her face in the wind. She was staring, with disconcerting concentration, straight at him.

Something moved within Miller, some long-repressed longing. At the same time he told himself that he wished she had never appeared, that he could do without the complications that her arrival entailed.

She swept a tress of hair from her face in a deliberate gesture, then walked from the hillock, into the dip and up the other side towards him.

She collided with something – someone – and the effect was almost comical. The impact stopped her briefly in her tracks, rocking her on her bare feet, before she gained equilibrium and continued forwards. Instead of walking with care, she seemed to take a satisfaction in moving at speed, ignoring the cries that followed her progress up the hill.

She paused before Miller, staring at him with a kind of resolved belligerence. She was older than he had first thought: perhaps in her 20s. Her face was small and weathered, not at all pretty but possessing a certain aggressive charm. Miller was aware of his heartbeat. He was amazed at the fact of her face, the sheer humanness of it: the small nose and long lips and the high, domed brow. It was the first flesh-and-blood face he had looked upon for a long time, and in its singularity it stood as a paradigm for all that was human.

He saw then that her hands were soiled, her hair matted, that her eyes glinted with a light of desperation.

She was shaking her head as if in disbelief. "I can see you," she said in an amazed whisper. "I really can see you." She had a northern accent, the harsh vowel sounds accentuating her naïve disbelief.

Miller removed his dark glasses, stared at her. "And I can see you, too."

His throat was dry. There were so many questions he wanted to ask that he did not know where to start.

"I saw you in London last week, in the restaurant. Couldn't believe my eyes. Thought I was seeing things."

Miller laughed suddenly: an uncontrollable burst of hilarity that spoke of his disbelief, his inability to handle what was happening.

The girl stared at him as if he were mad. "What's up?"

He dabbed his wet eyes with a handkerchief. "I'm sorry, it's just... Look, you're the first person I've seen in six months –"

"Me too. I mean, you're the first person I've seen for ages. Thought I was going loopy. But everything else seemed... I don't know... everything seemed normal, apart from me. They had me in a psychiatric ward, you know. When it happened, I just flipped. I was living rough, around King's Cross. Then I woke up and the world was empty. I ran around, crashing into things... people. So they locked me away." She shrugged, smiled at him. "But I got away, been on the move ever since."



She hesitated, thought about it, then joined him on the bench, drawing her legs up to her chest and hugging her nylon leggings. "Do you know what's happening to us?" There was more desperation in her tone than she wanted to admit.

He shook his head. "I honestly don't know."

She nodded, regarding him. "You seem to be doing okay for yourself, though. I've been following you – after I saw you in the restaurant. I nicked a car and followed you to Hampstead, except I lost you there. Had to wait around for days, then the other morning..."

"I..." he began. "I've adapted to the circumstances as well as can be expected."

"You've got a big house..."

He resented the implication in the statement, and then hated himself for feeling such mean-spirited resentment. Here he was, taking part in an encounter unique in human experience, and all he could think about was how he had to keep his distance from this strange and alien creature.

"I'm Lucy, by the way."

"Miller," he said, and forced himself to say, "Pleased to meet you, Lucy."

Staring at the twin peaks of her knees, from time to time darting a quick glance at him, she told him the story of her short and horrible life to date.

She was from Leeds, and her father had died when she was ten, and her step-father had raped her when she was twelve. At 15 she ran away from home, came to London and lived rough for five years, begging from commuters and occasionally stealing from shops and supermarkets.

As Miller listened, he realized that the tragedy of her personal life-story was that it was a succession of clichés all too common in today's society, a series of misfortunes he, in his privileged position, had no hope of understanding. He was reduced to a series of stock responses and phrases of commiseration, which might have appeared appropriate as lines of dialogue in fiction, but which in real life sounded empty and meaningless.

She trailed off. A silence came between them.

Miller wondered how he might make his excuses and leave. It crossed his mind that he should offer her a room, at least some food. But he wanted nothing more than to be away from her, back in the familiar territory of his own company.

"It's good to talk to someone again, Miller," she said. "What are you doing tomorrow? I know you come here most days."

He nodded, relieved at the possible way out she had given him. "I'll be here tomorrow," he said, "at the same time."

She smiled. "Good. I'll see you then, okay?" She hesitated, then pointed at his glasses and cane. "I like that. Very clever."

"You could do it too, Lucy. People avoid me, and it's an excuse if I do bump into people."

Lucy palmed a hank of hair from her high forehead, staring at him with her hand still in position like a visor. "It'd be no good for me now, Miller. You see, people can't see me any more. Two weeks ago I disappeared, just like they've disappeared." She smiled. "I just go around bumping into people, freaking them out. They must think I'm a ghost."



Miller stared at her, alarmed. "How long have you been like this – I mean, when did people first disappear?"

She shrugged. "Oh... more than six months ago."

He wondered if what had happened to Lucy two weeks ago, the fact that she was no longer visible to others, was yet another stage in this phenomenon, this gradual disenfranchisement of the soul? Would he, in turn, disappear in the eyes of others? The thought was appalling. How might he function, if this happened? How might he find work?

"Also," she went on, as if twisting the knife, "I can't hear people now. I'm blind and deaf to the human race. What do you think of that?"

He shook his head. Blind and deaf to the human race... "How terrible..." But he was thinking more of himself than of Lucy.

She said, "Look, I've got to be going."

He reached out – surprising himself with the gesture – and took her callused palm in his hand. "Do you have somewhere? I mean—"

She shook her head. "I'm fine, okay?" She smiled, her features showing compassion. "See you tomorrow, right?"

She jumped from the bench, hurried off in the direction of Highgate. Miller watched her as she skipped away, just once colliding with someone, the impact sending her spinning to the ground. She picked herself up, laughing out loud, and ran off into the trees.

The following day he began outlining a proposal for his next book. As he worked, he found his attention wandering. He could not erase the image of Lucy from his mind. Her face kept swimming before his vision, and her coarse northern accent filled his head. He hated himself for being unable to forget her, resented her for her intrusion into his hitherto orderly existence.

At five he cooked himself dinner and ate alone, as he had done for the past six years. He imagined Lucy sitting on the bench on the heath, waiting for him. He remained in his armchair, staring at his empty plate. He could not bring himself to move. He knew how to handle his present circumstances, was in full command of his day-to-day regime; to become emotionally involved with someone with whom he had nothing in common – other than the shared experience of the strange phenomenon – would only lead to mutual hurt. He told himself that she had survived very well without him until now, and would continue to do so in the future. It would be kinder to both himself and to Lucy if he left well alone.

The next day he lost himself in the novel proposal. He was pleased to find that, come five, he had outlined half a dozen chapters with hardly a thought for the girl.

He worked hard for the next few days, managing to banish Lucy from his thoughts and in so doing keeping a reign on the complex emotions of resentment and self-loathing. He expected to see her on the odd occasions when he ventured out for food, and experienced relief when he arrived home without having had the expected encounter. He avoided his customary evening strolls, a small price to pay for the reinstatement of the emotional status quo he had enjoyed for the past few years.

He completed the outline one week after his meeting with Lucy, printed out the manuscript and posted it off to Selwyn. For the rest of the day he sat in his study

and read through his note-books, looking for something that might spur his imagination. All the ideas seemed half-baked and unimaginative. He considered what Selwyn had suggested, that he concentrate on larger projects, topics closer to his heart.

He decided to ring Selwyn. He would talk an idea over with him, a literary novel about a man who wakes up one morning to find that the entire human race is invisible... Perhaps if he could not confront himself honestly through the medium of a relationship with another person, then he might come to some catharsis of his soul through the one medium of communication that he did understand: that of the novel.

Or he could always ask Selwyn to find him more hackwork.

He tapped Selwyn's number into his phone and waited. He heard the amplified click of the receiver being lifted at the other end – and then silence. He spoke, saying his name. "Hello? Hello – Selwyn? Can you hear me?"

Silence. He tried to get through again, and again the same response. He wondered if there was something wrong with his phone. He tried getting through to BT complaints, with no luck.

He decided to use the phone at the newsagents on the corner. He gathered his stick, his dark glasses, and left the house. He turned left down the street, heading towards the row of shops.

He moved slowly, sweeping his stick in a swift arc before him. Someone collided with him, almost knocking him off his feet. "I'm sorry," he began. "Please excuse me."

He expected some response, either an apology or a curse. He heard nothing, and set off again. He was approaching the newsagents when he collided with someone for the second time. "I'm awfully sorry," he said. Again his apology was greeted with silence. Sweating, hardly daring to dwell on what might be happening, he pushed into the shop. He saw, before the counter, a floating, rolled newspaper and a packet of crisps. He cocked his head to catch the sound of voices, but there was no sound whatsoever. The paper and the crisps levitated, and before Miller could move the invisible customer turned and stepped into him. The crisps and the paper fell to the floor. The door whipped open. Miller imagined the customer fleeing in fright at the experience of bumping into something invisible... He opened the door and hurried home, keeping to the gutter to lessen his chances of bumping into people who could no longer see him.

He arrived home without mishap, seated himself in the chair before the window, and wept.

During the long hours of the afternoon he tried to work out where this latest development left him in the scheme of things. He could hear and see no one, and no one could hear or see him. He could no longer carry out the simplest transaction with his fellow human beings. If he wished to feed himself, then he would be reduced to stealing food. If he continued to write for a living, then he could only contact Selwyn through written communication.

He wondered how long he would be able to exist like this.

At six, Miller left the house and made his way to the heath. He collided with perhaps a dozen people on the way, and slowed his walk so that he would lessen the chance of injury to himself and others.

There was no sign of Lucy on the heath. He examined the grass before the bench on the hill, looking for the tell-tale sign of trampling that would indicate that the seat was occupied.

He sat down, wondering whether he really wanted the girl to show herself.

As the sun set and a cooling wind eddied around him, Miller considered the possibility of ending his life. It was a solution he had considered from time to time before – but his life had never seemed *worth* taking, had never been that terrible to warrant bringing it to a sudden and irrevocable end. And now? That which had sustained him over the years, the unvarying and reassuring routine, was shattered. He was pitched into the traumatic territory of the unknown, and he did not know if he would be able to cope.

“Hello,” a voice said behind him. “Thought you might turn up, if I waited long enough.”

Lucy moved around the bench and sat down, hugging her shins to her chest. The sudden sight of her, the visual miracle of her physical reality, filled Miller with a sensation akin to joy.

He tried to keep his voice calm. “And what made you think that?”

“I’ve been watching you, Miller. This morning, I noticed – you’ve gone the same way as me. They can’t see you any more.” She stared at him. “We’re really the same now, aren’t we?”

A silence stretched between them. At last Miller said: “Why do you think...” Something caught in his throat. “Why do you think this happened to you, Lucy?”

She blinked, threw the question back at him. “Why do you think it happened to you?”

He smiled. “Shall I tell you?” he asked. “It’s only a theory, and it might not be right, but...” He hesitated. By telling her, he would be opening himself up for minute inspection, laying bare that part of him which he had kept protected with introversion and apathy.

“I’m a coward, Lucy,” Miller said. “For so long I’ve been unable to take, because I’ve been unwilling to give. I could never bring myself to feel affection for another human being...” He paused, staring into space. “Someone once said of me that I didn’t need people, and, do you know, that didn’t really hurt me at the time. I was too self-centred and shallow to realize what an indictment that verdict really was.” And he told her of his relationship with Laura, and the woman before that, and how he had hurt these people without really realizing that he was doing so, how he had hurt these people, because he had not known how to love them.

The sun set in laminated strata of orange and blood-red, like a banner declaring the birth of a new day, not the beginning of night.

“And you?” he asked at last.

She smiled sadly, forked away stray hair with the tines of her fingers. “After what my step-father did, I told myself that never, never ever again... So I ran away and didn’t let myself be used. I didn’t get close to anybody, you know? I’m 21, Miller, and you know what? – I’ve never had anyone.” She stopped suddenly, shak-

ing her head at her inability to fully articulate the degree of her pain.

Miller reached out to take her hand, and the warmth of it, the sudden electric vitality of her flesh, was like an affirmation.

They left the heath, keeping off the paths and scanning the grass for signs of trampling. They walked home along the road, stepping into the gutter to allow past the occasional driverless car, and the fact that they made it home without collision seemed to Miller a signal, an indication – despite the fear in his heart and the terrible sense of inadequacy at the core of his being – that what he was doing was right.

That night they lay side by side on the bed, holding each other and talking in whispers, as if the secrets they shared might be overheard and used against them. They talked of their pasts, of their hurts and disappointments, their failings and their guilt. They fell asleep, holding each other, as dawn lightened the sky outside.

For two days they remained in the house and talked and laughed and ate. Miller discovered a great affection deep within him, a desire to cherish and protect, and in turn be cherished and protected. On the second night their conversation halted, and they stared at each other, communication between them silent now but no less eloquent.

They moved to the bedroom and undressed and made love with the uncoordinated passion of the novices they were. In the early hours Lucy slept, her arms tight around Miller as if fearing that he might abscond.

Miller could not sleep. He extricated himself from her embrace and made his way to the study. He opened his journal and wrote of the events of past two days, taking care to describe exactly his thoughts and feelings.

Lucy was still asleep when he returned to the bedroom, her small shape curled beneath the sheets, child-like in her vulnerability. Miller lay down, amazed at the sound of her breathing, the potentiality of her being. He closed his eyes and soon slept.

He was awoken by something in the morning... or rather not so much by *something*, but by a subtle sense of *absence*. He blinked himself awake, recalling the events of the night before, and instinctively reached out for Lucy. As he did so, he had a terrible premonition – and his hand encountered a forbidding tundra of cool linen.

She was gone.

He dressed and hurried downstairs. The front and back doors were both locked from the inside. The windows were shut. He searched the house, but there was no sign of Lucy.

He returned to the bedroom, as if by magic he might find her restored to the bed. The sight of it, empty, reminded him of the joy they had shared – and filled him with despair.

He left the house and ran down the centre of the road, dodging the traffic. He scanned the streets, the gardens, for any sign of her. He ran onto the heath, taking pains to look out for trodden grass that would denote other people abroad at this early hour.

He sat on the bench on the hill, scanning the heath, the horizon. He remained there for a long time – cer-

tainly hours – as the sun rose over London. He thought back over his brief liaison with Lucy, and it came to him that the degree of feeling aroused in him was out of all proportion to the length of time he had known the girl. It was as if fate had played a cruel joke on him, to pay him back for all the years he had voluntarily shunned his fellow humans.

He returned home. He told himself that she would be there when he got back, cooking breakfast and oblivious of his desperation. He almost ran up the garden path, unlocked the door with fumbling haste and barged into the kitchen. Lucy was not there. The house was empty, silent. He was, as he had been for so many years, alone.

He passed the day in a daze. He sat in a chair by the window, hugging himself and staring blindly over the heath. As six o'clock approached, he told himself that he should be out there, actively looking for Lucy, rather than incarcerating himself in the house and bemoaning his fate.

For the second time that day he made his way to the heath and the bench on the hill. He sat and stared out at the deserted landscape, his heart heavy with a grief he had never before experienced, a despair at the wasted years of his life, the opportunities foregone, chances ignored.

Miller was not sure when exactly the transformation began.

So immersed in his self-pity, his rewriting of the past, he paid little attention to the empty world around him.

Perhaps it was the sound of voices that alerted him, startled him from his reverie, or perhaps the shadows that fell across the bench beside him. He looked up,

hardly daring to believe what he was seeing, as if this was yet another jest the world was playing.

He stared about him in wonder.

The heath was populated by a hundred strolling figures: couples walked hand in hand, families sat in circles and talked, groups of friends stood in quick and animated conversation. As Miller watched, he was struck by the fact that it was not so much their visual presence that was the miracle, but the fact of their interaction.

He imagined the teeming city beyond the horizon of the heath, the intricate ties of association, the web of affinity that humans wove which made existence worth the while.

He stared, hardly daring to hope that what he was beholding might endure.

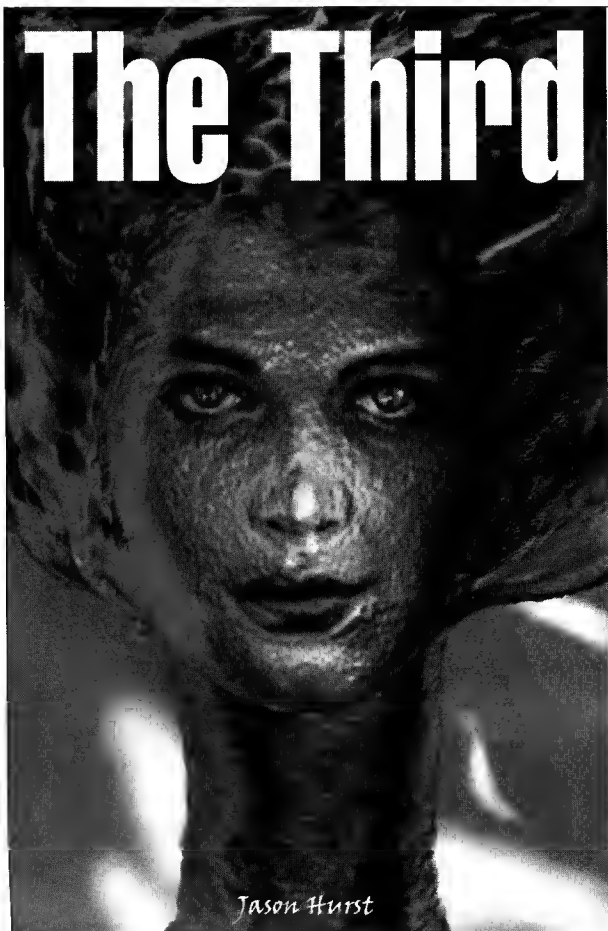
A middle-aged woman smiled at him. She gazed at the setting sun, the long shadows brush-stroking the heath. "Isn't it wonderful?" she said, before walking on.

Miller smiled to himself. He felt the urge to run after the women, take her in a fierce embrace.

He would go to King's Cross, he decided, try to find Lucy among the many homeless who made the streets of the city their home. And if, as he suspected, Lucy was not there to be found, had never been there...?

Then Miller realized that for him the real test would begin.

**Eric Brown's** last book, a collection of short stories called *Blue Shifting*, was reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 116. His last solo story in these pages was "A Prayer for the Dead" (issue 96, June 1995). He is also the author of a few collaborations, including "The Spacetime Pit" with Stephen Baxter (issue 107, May 1996) and "Appassionata" with Keith Brooke (issue 109, July 1996), and is busy with various other similar projects.



Jason Hurst

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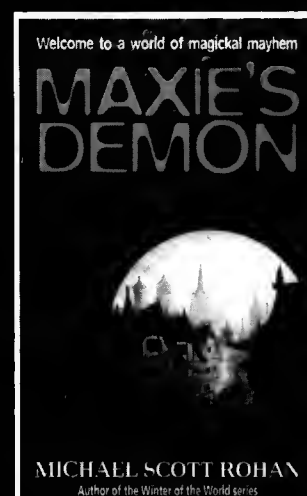


WELCOME TO A WORLD OF MAGICKAL MAYHEM

# MAXIE'S DEMON

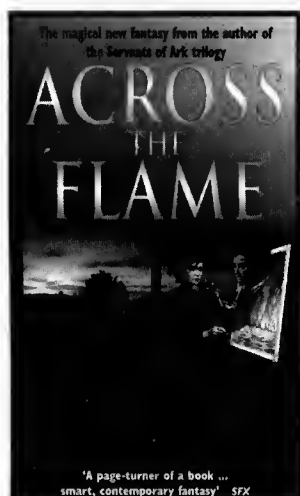
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## ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

As I write, the world is being rocked by the mindboggling news of the successful cloning of an issue of *Interzone*. Hubristic scientists extracted seeds of literary inspiration from an undifferentiated full stop taken from the udder of issue 100, and successfully grew an identical copy with the aid of a surrogate publisher. Churches worldwide issued statements of horror at this blasphemous experiment, which violates the express religious prohibitions of the Copyright Act; and pundits were quick to point out the hideous possibilities of a dystopian future in which the wanton rich could create additional copies of *Interzone* at will. The *Daily Mail* went further, with its headline "CAN WE RAISE THE DEAD?" and sensationalist predictions of what abominations might be spawned from live genetic material found in old copies of *SF Monthly* or – even worse – *Battlefield Earth*...

## A MELON FOR ECSTASY

**Iain Banks**, teenage role model, was denounced in the (Scottish) *Daily Mail* for being "recklessly irresponsible... the latest in a long line of teenage role models to endorse illegal drugs." Actually, he irresponsibly said that it was a bit hypocritical for smokers and boozers to express blanket outrage at "drugs," and recklessly suggested that Ecstasy might be less dangerous than alcohol. One blanches at such infamy.

**Adriana Caselotti** (1916-1996), who voiced Snow White in the Disney movie, died on 18 January. Apparently the only other movie work she ever did was to speak a single line in *The Wizard of Oz*.

**Tom Holt** grumbled (see last issue) that Janet Berliner's proposal for a "Hell as tourist trap" theme anthology seemed to be rather blatantly pinched from his novel *Faust Among Equals*. The lady's white-hot response

declared that this was offensive and impossible, since although *Faust Among Equals* was indeed the sole paradigm example she'd cited as the sort of fiction she wanted, she had never read it. (Pardon? Er, its mention was suggested by her pal Peter Beagle.) Subsequently, the mighty Holt vs Berliner fracas devolved into a merry exchange of e-mailed olive branches.

**Graham Joyce**, on discovering that our literary connoisseur Thog (see below) had taken special note of his bowels, moaned: "Oh God. It was the senna pods what did it, cruelly administered to me when I was but a child..."

**Christopher Priest's** plans to become a style-guru contributor to *Wired UK* were deftly countered by the unanswerable editorial riposte that their March issue was to be the last. Not so much wired as fused...

**Tad Williams & Deborah Beale** (writes a feisty correspondent) "gave birth, well, Debs did anyway, to Connor Beale Williams on 27 Jan. Arse about, and 10lb 8oz, he was delivered by c-section. Mom, Dad and Baby all doing well."

## INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

**Clarke Award.** Another year, another shortlist: *Voyage* by Stephen Baxter, *The Calcutta Chromosome* by Amitav Ghosh, *Engines of God* by Jack McDewitt, *Blue Mars* by Kim Stanley Robinson, *Gibbon's Decline and Fall* by Sheri S. Tepper, and *Looking for the Mahdi* by N. Lee Wood. Winner to be announced at a ceremonial thrash in (again) the Science Museum, 28 May.

**The Shady Side.** Certain regular writers for the UK horror magazine *The Dark Side* have grumpily withdrawn their services owing to non-payment of invoices going back to May 1996. Similar problems afflicted the sister title *Infinity* (a sort of poor fan's *SFX*), which has reportedly folded. Asking for one's money – I am unattributably told – causes the publishers to whinge about "disloyalty."

**The Bookseller** recently published one of its rare Top SF/Fantasy Sellers charts. #1 Terry Pratchett, *Maskerade*; #2 Rob Grant, *Backwards* (Red Dwarf spinoff); #3 more Pratchett, *Hogfather*; #4 M. P. Kube-McDowell, *Star Wars: Tyrant's Test*; #5 Pratchett again, *The Colour of Magic*; #6 Alan Dean Foster, *Mid-Flinx*; #7 bloody hell it's that man Pratchett, with *Mort*; #8 Raymond E. Feist, *Rise of a Merchant Prince*.

**Party Time.** Our editor was mortified that I forgot to mention the hideously hot, crowded and smoky launch party for the very splendid benefit anthology *The Best of Interzone* (HarperCollins, plug, plug). Nice

people. Bad site: Forbidden Planet bookshop is *not party-shaped*. Bad sight: Paul Brazier's suave suit and waistcoat complemented by a luminescent yellow tie, eye-hurtingly patterned with liquorice allsorts. Alternative attraction: Gollancz's simultaneous launch of Gwyneth Jones's spiffy *Phoenix Café* (£16.99) at a pub down the road. Ansible Party Rating: three paracetamols. Joe-Bob says check it out.

**Nebula Awards.** The current novel finalists are: Nicola Griffith, *Slow River*; Nina Kiriki Hoffman, *The Silent Strength of Stones*; Patricia McKillip, *Winter Rose*; Tim Powers, *Expiration Date*; Robert J. Sawyer, *Starplex*; and Neal Stephenson, *The Diamond Age*. Winner to be announced about five seconds before this issue appears.

**Small Press.** The new *Fantasy Annual* (Spring 97, \$8/£6) sounds like a nostalgia trip for oldie sf fans: stories by E. C. Tubbs, Sydney J. Bounds and John Russell Fearn (*d.* 1960), plus articles by Fearn's indefatigable bibliographer Philip Harbottle and others. Info from co-editors Sean Wallace, 415 Merri-man Rd, Akron, OH 44303, USA, or Philip Harbottle, 32 Tynedale Ave, Wallsend, Tyne & Wear, NE28 9LS.

**London Circle.** Those free-for-all sf pub meetings on the first Thursday each month seem to be shifting from the crammed Wellington pub to the nearby Jubilee (York Road, close to Waterloo station).

**Thog's Masterclass.** See *Nipples and Die Dept*: "Her breath caught in her throat and her nipple burrowed into his palm like a friendly mole."... "Kyna braced her hands on his shoulders and rode him, her breasts swaying in his face like overfilled balloons, the nipples thrusting out enough to put his eyes at risk." (both Gary L. Holleman, *Howl-O-Ween*, 1996) *Dredged Claw Dept*: "Sam felt the claw in the pit of his stomach, a dredging in his bowels."... "And with every minute urging the evening on to midnight, the leather football of anxiety inflating in Sam's stomach was pumped still further."... "A reptile claw dragged at his bowels."... "He felt a dredger move across his heart."... "He felt a claw of anxiety in his bowels." (all Graham Joyce, *The Tooth Fairy*, 1996. Our researcher adds: "Sam has quite a lot of things happen to his bowels, but I tastefully didn't note them all.") *Special Own-Goal Dept*: John Grant, original creator of Thog, cringed at his own daughter's discovery in his story for Mike Ashley's forthcoming anthology of Shakespearean whodunnits: "Then she would feel her breasts and discover that she lacked a penis..." (For some reason he changed it.)

For hundreds of pages, it looks as though Tad Williams has striven mightily – teeth grinding, will dogged, luck worn to the nub – in order to give birth to a disaster of growth. *Otherland: City of Golden Shadow* (Legend, 1996, £16.99; DAW, 1997) is a gnat the size of a mountain, a gnat whose innards have been crushed by a vast avoirdupois of carapace, so that the inner labyrinth of story Williams wishes to unpack for us seems, in the end, about as lissome as roadkill after the ants have been. And it looks as though he *knew he was doing it*.

*Otherland: City of Golden Shadow*, which is the first of a projected four vast volumes, and which manifests itself as an ineluctably *worthy* attempt to marry the narrative structure of fantasy to the forward thrust of the explanatory conventions of science fiction, drones on for much of its length in the self-conscious, senatorial, mortuary, belated, benumbing flat bellow of a memorial speech delivered long after rubber chicken. Indirectly and directly, the book declares itself to be about Story – “stories were the things people used to give the universe a shape,” a phrase whose depressive inertness emanates like a fug from the word “things,” which is exactly *not* the *mot just* for catching the verb of tale on the wing – but it is in fact profoundly post-Story, just as a stone tablet, in a municipal park, carved upon a tomb encasing the Founder of the abandoned company town, in a drought, is profoundly post-Founder.

Then it begins to surface, like a dolphin breaking through ice. It begins to become almost shapely. The pace, at such long last, begins to quicken. It may be too late; certainly *Otherland* will have lost a high proportion of the readers it ultimately deserves, long before they have a chance to come into reach of its gifts; but this will be a shame. Because this first volume of *Otherland* could be the start of something magnificent: a tale of egress from the saltflats of Millennium; a marriage of fantasy story, which grasps at the truths of the backward and abysm of the human enterprise, and sf argument, which posits outcomes and venues in terms by virtue of which we can imagine the human story just possibly continuing, despite all we have learned in 1997 to the contrary – lessons Williams editorially interjects through the Dos Passos-like newspaper clippings that begin each chapter.

All the same, because of the bone-headed carapace that encases its first half a thousand huge pages, it is hard to envision an ideal reader for *Otherland*. Those familiar with Williams's main work to date – the “Memory, Sorrow and Thorn” trilogy comprising *The Dragonbone Chair* (1988), *Stone of Farewell* (1990) and *To Green Angel Tower* (1993; vt in 2 vols

## A Tad Phatic

John Clute

*Siege*, 1994 UK, and *Storm*, 1994 UK) – are going to find *Otherland* lacking in the clearly-defined targets for revisionist-fantasy games and strictures that redeem “Memory...” from any sense that its author could be naively unselfconscious about his Fantasyland setting, his characters ladled holus-bolus from the Cauldron of Story, his plot travestying the unavoidable genre fantasy drama in which the ugly-duckling hero grows into manhood and discovers himself to be the King of all he surveys. All these elements are duly visible in “Memory...,” though occasionally the coarse weave of Williams's style allows readers to lose touch with the overall shaping hand; but, in the end, “Memory...” is triumphantly unrelenting. Through its pages, we come to understand that Williams loves and hates J. R. R. Tolkien, and clearly and unequivocally loathes most of the imitation Tolkien sagas that began to proliferate around 1977, the end-moraine delreys which have very nearly dammed off fantasy from the deep waters of its source; this love/hate generates the momentum of the sequence, helps readers caught in its 2,500 pages to recollect



## REVIEWED

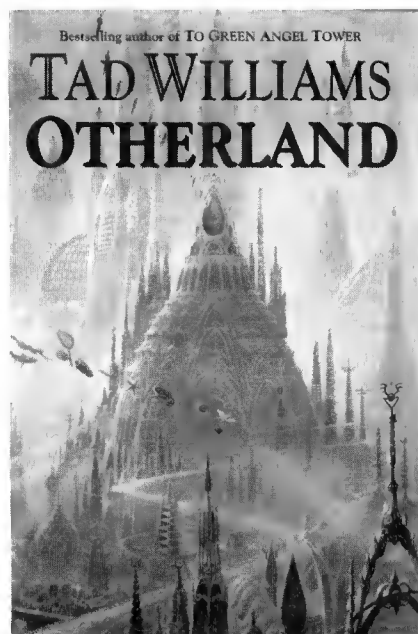
its shape, and ironizes the whole.

Perhaps the same, in retrospect, after all four volumes have appeared, will give a hindsight clarity to the whole of *Overland*, whose subsequent volumes will be *River of Blue Fire*, *Mountain of Black Glass* and *Sea of Silver Light*; and that readers will skim through the repetitions and otiose fingerpointings of the obvious and longueurs of the first two-thirds of the first volume, in order to gain the feast to come.

One hopes so.

Despite its nearly 800 large pages, and despite its author's declaration in his Acknowledgements that it “has been a hideously complicated book to write,” *Otherland: City of Golden Shadow* is in fact a not particularly convoluted prelude to that central tale this reviewer (for one) thinks may turn out to be of consuming interest. The time is the near future, on this planet. A number of characters who are variously familiar with the worldwide web – which now approaches cyberspace in its complexity, and in its capacity to enfold clients into its simulations – find themselves 1) in personal crisis and 2) tantalized by images of a golden city, which is represented in terms that seem impossibly dense, seem to require unbelievable concentrations of computer power to bring off.

These characters include Renie, a black female computer technician from South Africa, and her buddy !Xabubu, who is a Bushman chock full of wisdom; Orlando, an adolescent boy with progeria (the aging disease), and his buddy Frederick, who turns out to be a girl in drag; and Paul Jonas, who seems to be a World War I soldier translated into the future, where he blunders through worlds



derived from the work of Lewis Carroll (the readers know these worlds are Virtual Reality constructs, and may, justly, be very suspicious about his amnesia, which is normally a sign in fantasy, or sf novels of a certain sort, that a Hidden Monarch is about to Remember the Rune of Self-Knowledge and Power). There are other characters: Sellars, an old man who inveigles a young girl on an army camp to help him escape his captors, who are almost certainly those responsible for spending trillions of dollars on the construction of Otherland, which officially does not exist; we also meet, less often than perhaps we wish, various Adversary figures, men and women involved in the financing and creation and maintenance of Otherland; and finally we meet the actual lords of Otherland, men who – like the “gods” in Philip Jose Farmer’s *World of Tiers* sequence – rule capriciously over various worldlets within the encompassing construct. The chief of these is Ra, who rules a VR Abydos-That-Was, and much else.

All this may sound complicated. In the event it is not. None of the characters we meet – it is clearly part of Tad Williams’s longterm strategy that this be so – strikes an original note: they are all out of the fantasy/sf grab-bag; and it is clear that they have been *selected* by others (see vols 2, 3, 4) precisely for their story-shaped ordinariness. We of course recognize them more or less immediately. And very little happens to any of them that 1) we do not anticipate (which may be Williams’s intention) or 2) is not narrated, all the same, at excruciating length (and if this too is Williams’s conscious intention, which this reviewer thinks both likely and unlikely [see below], then everyone has paid very heavily for allowing him to get away with it).

The problem, however, is not simply that very little happens that we did not anticipate; the problem – it is something which contributes to that sense of a crushing carapace of dead story blocking us from the real thing – is that most of that which *does* happen is essentially *hushable*, because *Otherland: City of Golden Shadow* is a tale of recruitment, which means that all that goes before the act of recruiting serves very little more than an excuse for that act to take place. Characters may occasionally revert to, or recollect, the status quo ante; but the real weight and interest and momentum of the tale tend to diminish these moments of return, rendering them transparent to the “reality” of the new world, the new self, the new story. Renie and !Xabbu and all the rest undergo storylines of this detachable nature, storylines which finally begin to collide after page 500 or so, but which, no matter how long it takes for them to be told

– the interminable length of the story of Renie and !Xabbu does hint at an explanation (again, see below) for the near fatal lassitude of the book as a whole – they are living through storylines that are fated to be *shed* as soon as Renie et al 1) pass through the portal into the secondary world of Otherland, and 2) meet there, and become Companions.

Near the end of this first volume, about 700 pages in, we finally do reach the point where Renie and all the others learn that they have been selected for some larger task in the new world. At this point, Williams indulges in a passage of sarcastic guying at the nature of Story which – unless it is simply a mistake, simply another way of telling some reader who had never read a book before that he’s now reached an exciting and important moment which is also a cliché which the author (hey, trust me) *knows all about* – is very nearly fatal, though the effect of the passage (which is that of a consoling repetition of the already known) once again hints at an explanation for the near disaster of *Otherland* (again, see below).

Everyone has arrived in a Virtual Reality domain bordering upon the densely defended heart imperiums of Otherland. A new character is introduced. His name is Sweet William, he has just been brought into contact with those recruits to the Fellowship whose stories we have followed, step by step, for aeons; and he evinces some unwillingness to travel on into the true heart of Otherland in order to save a wee sick child, rescue another (who may be the same in a deep mask), self-transcend this mortal coil, gain true health, and ultimately find out if Otherland is simply a Virtual Reality environment gone haywire or if, in fact, and in the end very interestingly, it may be a self-sustaining, evolving, unpredictable and ultimately ungovernable reality, a secondary world out of the worlds of fantasy but powered by computer power out of the worlds of sf, rather like the VR universe described by Greg Egan in his *Permutation City* (1994). But Sweet William will have none of this. “I shall climb into bed with something warm,” he says, “and do my best to forget I heard *any* of this nonsense.”

“But you can’t!” The brawny, long-haired man with the action-flick muscles got shakily to his feet [back in the real world, this is Orlando]. His voice was deep, but his way of speaking seemed incongruous. “Don’t any of you understand? This is... this is the Council of Elrond!”

The painted mouth [of Sweet William] pursed in a grimace. “What are you rattling on about?”

“Don’t you know Tolkien? I

mean, this is it! One ring to rule them all, one ring to find them!” The barbarian seemed to be getting worked up. Renie [whose VR semblance is a version of Nefertiti], who had been about to say something sharp to Sweet William herself, swallowed her annoyance [which is a dead metaphor writers whose weave is less coarse tend, frankly, to swallow before they type it] and watched. There was something almost crazy in the man’s excitement, and for a moment Renie wondered if he might be mentally unbalanced.

“Oh, one of *those* sort of stories,” Sweet William said disdainfully. “I was wondering about that Mister Muscle look of yours.”

[p. 705 of proof]

And we very nearly lose the entire book.

The emotion this reviewer felt at this point was extreme. I did not read 700 pages [said this reviewer to himself] in order to be fed a load of babynalk post-modernist Shock of Self-Referentiality toon prattle, and all of it “revealing” to us the structure of a book whose structure was self-evident from the beginning. What’s going on here [said this reviewer to himself]? What’s the secret behind this obsessive *consolation*?

For let us be clear. *Otherland* has momentum, sincerity of purpose, large scale of ambition, interesting territory beyond the slingshot paragraphs that end volume one. It may become a central text of fantasy/sf, insofar as this literature attempts to confront its own tendency to quail from the real future. *Otherland* may become – at least in our imaginations – a manual for surviving asymptote into those tomorrows we no longer wish to reach.

But there is something wrong. It may be nothing more than Tad Williams’s well-known lack of concision, or his worthy (but Dreiseresque) cloth-handedness when it comes to the depiction of character, or the blunt axe of his style in general – for he is a writer of bad sentences which build into decent paragraphs which cohere into grand sweeps of story. Or it may be something else, too. In conversations and panels which have been distributed on the web, this reviewer – after various attempts to work out why fantasy writing is uniquely terrible, why the default level of fantasy writing is almost infinitely worse than the default level of sf writing, even though the best fantasy is *better*-written than the best sf – has reverted to a term from social anthropology, phatic discourse.

Phatic discourse describes the kind of literally meaningless conversation – it may be about the weather, it may be about something of importance but so frequently reiterated that what had been news turns into noise – that characterizes the sort of talk folk



engage in with each other when they are re-affirming the existence (and meaningfulness) of their lives, their community, their world. It is essentially an oral form of word-use. Heightened into aesthetic form, it may be the sound of the Greek chorus, or of Homer's wine-dark tags, or Samuel Beckett, or Harold Pinter; but all of these forms of phatic discourse are, in the end, oral. In fantasy writing, for reasons this reviewer has not plumbed, a cloudy, shapeless, entropic, written form of phatic discourse seems to have become very widespread. Perhaps because almost any fantasy of any genuine interest is very threatening, fantasies which set out to be *not* threatening – fantasies set in fantasylands which must not change, featuring protagonists who must remain recognizable templates for their readers, and telling tales which do not ultimately threaten the

status quo – tend to fall into passages of phatic discourse. We may think of the Consolation Tolkien originally espoused; but we would be foolish to think we can laugh away the vast trilogies whose thousands of pages are barely sufficient to contain the eternities of consolatory repetition demanded of the form.

Tad Williams is a fantasy writer who writes long. At the conscious level, he is revisionist, sincere, transformative, argumentative, forward-thrusting; and much of his work exemplifies these clearly identifiable intentions of the conscious artist. But whenever his plot requirements ask that he grope into areas where he feels insecure, he slips into phatic repetitions of material, like some housewife on the Liffey, yakking the river of life. The hundreds of pages devoted, for instance, to Renie and

her personal problems could, in the hands of an editor with nerve, be reduced to dozens. *And they would mean more.* For the ultimate insult of phatic discourse in written prose is that it drains meaning through repetition. By increasing the entropy of the scene told – so that there is insufficient energy left to spook a gnat – phatic discourse reassures the reader that attention need not be paid, the municipal bricks in the graveyard in the company town will hold forever, change need not be feared, orthodoxy need not tremble. Hey! A thousand-year Fantasyland!

Tad Williams is trying to write a novel. It could be a central text of genre, an illuminated way forward, compass north, through the snares of illusion of Virtual Reality. Unless he is careful, however, he is going to continue bricking a Reich.

John Clute

Are you feeling persecuted? If you belong to that shrinking and beleaguered class known as "the Employed"; if you have been driven crazy by nearly 20 years of merciless ideological revolution; if the staff at your organization has been rationalized to the point of non-existence and at the same time given ten times its former workload; if, in short, you have a strong impression that you are doomed to spend the rest of your life (until you starve on your non-existent pension) licking dogdirt from the boots of Mad Stalinists down on Animal Farm: lighten up (did I hear someone say Conservatives can't be Stalinists? Do not make me laugh). Jack Womack has a hero for you.

*Let's Put the Future Behind Us* (HarperCollins/Flamingo, £8.99) is a departure from Womack's previous series of novels. It is set in present-day Moscow, with only glancing references to the US, and though it depicts violent social disintegration there is no sense of a larger agenda in reserve. I would think it likely that there will be no prequels or sequels to this startlingly cheery slice of mayhem. The hero for our times is Max Borodin, a thoroughly modern Moscow entrepreneur; with a banking business that operates from a fleet of street-corner vans – a type of financial institution common in the real life ex-Eastern Bloc – a flourishing line in high-class fake commercial documentation, and a small, utterly loyal, private army.

By the standards of what's going on around him Max's operations are eminently legal and commendably non-violent. It is through his mistress's slimy husband, Dmitry – art collector and former minister – that this worldly-wise yet still human survivor becomes embroiled with the unpleasant and dangerous types who represent the real nature of New

## The Running Jumping Standing Still Game

Gwyneth Jones

Russia. A complicated adventure transpires, involving shipments of a bizarre recreational drug called fred; hordes of savage Georgian gangsters, a sentimental fascist political Messiah and some strange goings-on in the crematoria business. Meanwhile, Max's crazy brother Evgeny is trying to set up a theme park called "Sovietland" – which is to be a kind of Communist Bloc Disney, for curious Westerners and nostalgic locals, complete with deliberately surly staff, hideous architecture, non-functional rides and unspeakably drab decor... I won't begin to unravel the happy convolutions of the plot. It would be a shame to deny Womack's readers that pleasure. Suffice it to say that as far as I can tell everything works and everything fits together, momentarily at least.

Max Borodin, our genial narrator, came near to losing my sympathy early on, when attempting to present his middle-aged appetite for a younger, prettier bedmate than his

spouse as some kind of mystical experience. It is better not to look too closely at his relatively virtuous credentials, or at the devices whereby inconveniences disappear from his life (the aforesaid spouse suffers a peculiarly hideous death: surely out of proportion with the crime of wearing big knickers and being in the way of male-menopausal romance). The inevitable scenes of spectacular violence, however, are treated much more powerfully than is usual in the modern thriller. The efforts of most shock-horror wannabes to excite pity and terror are enough to make a cat laugh. In Jack Womack's fiction, when sickening and terrifying things happen sickness and terror leap from the page, leaving the mind ringing. There's no doubt that Womack is a stylist who writes with effortless authority. Violence aside, his obvious enjoyment of the Russian music he has added to his hyper-real prose is one of the pleasures of the book.

No doubt the whole enterprise is in doubtful taste. There are, after all, other former Cold War superpowers one could mention, where bloody mayhem in the streets is not unknown. One might ask why social disintegration in the USA gets to be treated as a sombre science fiction, while the Russian version is well over the border into actualité; and played for laughs. But though curiously reminiscent of the discreet, "saying things without saying them" criticism of Former Eastern Bloc sf, *Let's Put the Future Behind Us* is too jolly, and too indulgent towards its hero, to be considered a serious satire on anybody's ideological state. After a mass grave has been uncovered on the site, the "Sovietland" theme park, which recurs as a framing device through the novel, is dumped in favour of a champagne-and-caviar luxury club. Thus, in our post-civilization world,



the winners feast while the anonymous hordes of losers rot underfoot. But the novel itself is the successful Disneyfication: not so much a social commentary as a terrific fairground ride and a gloriously over-the-top treatment of your average white-collar *fin de siècle* predicament. You will have no trouble in putting your doubts aside while the show is going on. Highly Recommended.

While *Let's Put the Future Behind Us* is less science-fictional than a typical 1997 news story, Michael Scott Rohan's *Maxie's Demon* (Orbit, £5.99) comes zooming into the genre from the opposite trajectory, with a fantasy plot right out of kiddie cartoon time. The Max in this story is an ingratiating loser with a taste for other people's fast cars, who slams a stolen Testarossa through a flaw in space-time and ends up dropping in on a demon-raising ceremony being held by the great Tudor magician Dr Dee. Predictably the demon (whose name is legion) gets imprinted on our hero instead of its/their conjurers. It follows him back to his rather desperate and squalid life in present-day East London; where it takes the form of a gang of wild and wonderfully attractive pirate-figures, who provide him with alarming assistance in his encounters with Estuarine low-life, and insist that he's their rightful lord.

Maxie's only hope of shaking off this unwelcome fan club is to return to the Motorway Junction Between the Worlds. Here he meets characters from a previous Scott Rohan series, and is persuaded to rendezvous with Dee and his sinister assistant Edward Kelley – who are eager to disenchant him. But it isn't that simple; and in the end it isn't Maxie who needs to be rescued. The action moves, through an underworld space-time distortion involving real, smelly sewers, to 16th-century Prague, where Maxie meets an Emperor, is co-opted into Dr Dee's intriguing sexual ménage, and enlists the aid of another great magician whom he meets in the Jewish Quarter.

Those of you who have been parents of young children over the past few years may recall a TV cartoon called *Mighty Max*. Though essentially little more than the advertising campaign for a range of plastic pocket-money toys, this was a favourite of mine. *Maxie's Demon* has exactly the same story line: a wise-cracking and very down-to-earth little boy hounded by bizarre fantasy characters who insist he's the Chosen One; candidly informative Historical Adventures; and a (not very) secret agenda of humane, life-enhancing values. The comparison is by no means a denigration of Michael Scott Rohan's entertaining novel. On



the contrary, *Maxie's Demon* just goes to show exactly what can be done with a well-worn theme: how an entirely playful story and a routine idea can be skilfully laced with genuine feeling and skin-prickling historical comment. (Note the sticky moment when the legendary Rabbi Loew, with attendant Golem, asks Maxie to tell him what hope the future holds for European Jewry).

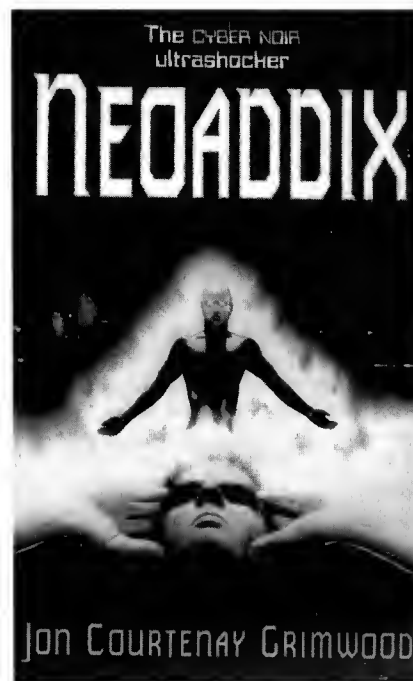
Originality is a wonderful thing in genre fiction, I'm sure – if you can find it. But it very rarely resides in the broad outlines. Even a Testarossa isn't a wildly original machine. It has the usual arrangement of wheels,

and an internal combustion engine: the difference, like the devil, is in the details. Apparently this is not Maxie's first outing, I suspect it may not be his last. I hope the sparkle never grows dim.

From sparkling fantasy to the seriously tedious. Jack Deighton's *A Son of the Rock* (Orbit, £5.99) is a science-fiction novel about open-cast mining. The story is set in a future where a new wave of economic expansion is moving in on various habitable planets, sweeping away the gone-native remnants of an earlier diaspora. Alan (if there's a mention of his second name I couldn't spot it, though most characters seem to have two) works for a mining company. One day he meets a solitary old codger who is living wild near the site of one of his company's giant diggings, and is impressed. The codger speaks to him in *Star Trek*-archaic: "The Rock's gifts are plentiful... To you will fall the task of preserving the Rock," and is otherwise remarkable for bearing the grotesque stigmata of old age.

In Alan's culture everyone takes a youth drug, Euthuol, which makes you sterile but preserves your looks beyond their natural span, until a final, swift descent into senility and death. Alan, owing to a freak genetic flaw, is unable to take Euthuol. This gives him some fellow-feeling with the old man, Sonny: but not enough to persuade him to take on the task of preserving the poor chap's surviving patch of wilderness, the eponymous Rock. Eventually, Alan ends up turning Sonny's last stand into an exploitative news-item for the TV tabloids. At a later date he gets his come-uppance, when his childhood home is discovered to be riddled with exactly the mineral needed in large quantities for a new form of hyper-drive. Enter the giant diggers – result, a great big hole. Already, I fear I've made the story sound far more gripping than it is on the page.

There is a subplot in the form of an account of Alan's sexual career, in which we discover that Jack Deighton has a bit of a thing for Bjork Bjork, and a series of girlfriends tell our hero they are packing him in because he is vain and selfish – which is no doubt true, but also kinder than saying he is hideously boring. In undermining the more honest appraisal of the few frigid lesbian bitches who turn him down, they're probably not doing him any favours in the long run. I'm really sorry to be so cutting about a first-time novel from a new British writer, but the fact remains that the writing is amateurish and the sf content is extremely thin – no depth to the imagined future, perfunctory fantasy science; even the Outside Broadcast media-technology is largely





unchanged from the present day. And *I felt guilty but I wasn't bothered enough to do anything about it* does not constitute a howl of moral outrage. Nor even a whimper. If, however, Alan's character was meant to come over as an irritating self-satisfied waste of time and space, then at least something worked.

Luckily Jon Courtney Grimwood, author of the *soi-disant* "cybernoir ultrashocker" *neoAddix* (NEL, £5.99), is a freelance journalist and a contributing editor to *New Woman*, so I don't have to worry about trashing another neophyte. *New Woman*, as some of you may know, is the most recalcitrantly sex-crazed of the young women's glossies. The sexually explicit content of *neoAddix* isn't quite so relentless, but there we run out of points of difference. Jon Courtney Grimwood combines an incredibly ancient Hammer Horror plot (undead French aristocratic Illuminati, if you must know), with scraps from the fabric of every notable sf trend in the past 15 years and a prose style ripped straight from the oozing,

steaming bowels of *Hello* magazine. I expect he thinks he's onto a good thing, and for all I know he could be right. I certainly laughed aloud at some points, and never felt as if I was being tortured. As ultrashockers go, slogging through *A Son of the Rock* was by far the more genuinely unpleasant reading experience. But I don't know if that's a compliment.

Allen Ashley's *The Planet Suite* (TTA Press, £4.99) is a small-press first novel that comes with encouraging remarks from Brian Aldiss and the support of the British Fantasy Society. I'd like to be more encouraging myself, but this slim work is a private, somewhat shapeless prose poem rather than a novel. For such a project to succeed the writing would have to be truly out of the ordinary, and I don't think that's the case here. A more conventional fiction, or else a more conventionally poetic form, might have been a better vehicle for this uncertain mixture of memories, dreams and reflections.

And finally, *The City of Golden*

*Shadow* (Legend, £16.99), episode one in Tad Williams's new epic *Otherland*. Apparently John Clute has volunteered a major review of this tome, so I will merely reflect that at 770 pages the ratio of ideation to word-count is positively homeopathic. It may not do you much good, but at least it can't do you any harm. And one more thing – I do not buy this stuff about body-tanks full of electrolytic gel. I can't believe that's the way things are going to go in virtuality experience: a) it is creepy, in the manner of some Michael Crichton medi-death movie; b) I simply can't see a mass-market application down that road. I'm convinced the future can be glimpsed elsewhere, such as in that sweaty little maze beside our local bowling alley here in Brighton-and-Hove. I'm interested to note (in a recent *New Scientist* article) that the Sega Megadrive folks are beginning to investigate literally *active* interactive gaming. See you down the megazone, compadres.

Gwyneth Jones

The reviewer has many obligations, of which the two most important are to comment on the literary qualities of the book on offer, and to indicate what manner of man or woman might be induced to part with hard cash for it. Reviewing Terry Goodkind's earlier books in the "Sword of Truth" series (in *Interzones* 90 and 103), I think I may have concentrated on the first to the detriment of the second.

For above all, Goodkind writes about domination, especially the domination of one sex by another. Assertive women throng his pages, and he writes most passionately of the Mord-Sith: beautiful, emotionally maimed, leather-clad dominatrices, whose favoured weapon, the Agiel, agonizes wielder and victim in equal measure. Other women suffer rape, brutalization and severed nipples. Now that a section of my readership has rushed out to buy *Blood of the Fold* (Millennium, £16.99 hardcover, or £10.99 trade paperback) and its predecessors, the rest of us can consider its less blatant aspects.

Goodkind writes heroic fantasy of considerable pretension, never failing to emphasize the starkness of the choices that confront his characters. They are constantly required to hazard not only life but freedom, love and reputation for the sake of the Greater Good, and every achievement presents a trap or a moral dilemma. Richard Cypher, the hero, would far prefer to live out his days as a woodsman, and it is only with great reluctance that he undertakes the role which events ultimately require of him: autocrat of an expanding empire. On the way he deliberately

## Domination Fantasy

Chris Gilmore

destroys a noble tradition with which his beloved Kahlen is intimately connected, and the Palace of the Prophets, with its great library of prophecies fulfilled, frustrated and uncertain. Both these acts are necessary, and are forced upon him by the vaulting ambition and total wickedness of his latest powerful foe.

For having vanquished not only his own fiendish father but the Keeper of the Underworld, he must now take on the Emperor Jagang, a "dream walker" (what it sounds like) whose ambition is to rule the world, and who believes that will be more easily done once it has been purged of magic – which means killing Richard, Kahlen and most of their friends and relations by way of overture. So they're off again. Goodkind presents a suitably loathsome range of subsidiary villains, including the treacherous Sisters of the Dark, the invisible, murderous *mrishwith*, and most of all Tobias Brogan the witchfinder, who is obviously mod-

elled on Matthew Hopkins but has no qualms about using the magic of his sister Lunetta (with whom he enjoys an incestuous relationship) to root out her fellow "banelings."

So far, so good; Goodkind has even done his readers the kindness of writing the horrid Rachel out of the script, but certain diseconomies of scale are beginning to creep in, along with some carelessness. He writes well when his imagination is fully engaged, but when it's not we get sentences like, "The room flashed with blinding light as he threw another lightning bolt across the room." I have quoted worse in these pages, but that's no excuse.

The three books to date constitute a novel of over 1600 pages, necessitating a number of ungainly data-dumps which Goodkind clearly disliked writing, and are no substitute for reading them in the right order. Moreover, while it is unified by its atmosphere and admirably held together, its structure is too episodic for any shape to emerge. Finally, it remains unfinished; since we aren't shown the death of Jagang it's a racing certainty he has survived, and as most of the Sisters of the Dark certainly have, there's ample mischief loose to set a fourth volume rolling. And when the series concludes, will I go back to the beginning and read the lot straight through, as I intend to read the whole of David Wingrove's *Chung Kuo*? Probably not; heroic fantasy is a crowded field.

Convention holds that if you set a novel entirely on Mars (say) or in the Spain of the Cid, the dialogue, apart from the odd Martian/Spanish

word for which there is no equivalent, will be rendered in English. In *Twitchy Eyes* (Michael Joseph, £15.99) Joe Donnelly has extended that convention; though it is set in and around a depressed industrial town on the west coast of Scotland in the 1960s, there's no hint of dialect in anyone's speech, and very little in their vocabulary. To me that makes for enhanced accessibility, though I found the anachronistic use of "No way, Ho Zay!" rather broke the spell; the purist may regard it as a betrayal.

The tale concerns a bisexual maniac who sets about getting his jollies with local children (though he also kills adults), and is told partly through his own twitchy eyes, partly through those of his actual and potential victims. His *modus operandi*, which involves inflicting extensive and serious non-fatal injuries, then leaving his victim trussed and gagged to die of thirst, is described in stomach-churning detail for those who like that sort of thing, as is the condition of the bodies when found days or weeks *post mortem* (it's a hot summer); otherwise, this is very much a social-realistic novel about the ignorance, class-hatred, prurience, religious mania, vandalism and casual cruelty to animals and each other which constitute the joys of boyhood in those parts (or so Donnelly would have us believe; I recall no such atmosphere among the children from my time on Islay). There were times when the incidents read like a black parody of Richmal Crompton, but the religious mania which lies at the core of the book can rationalize anything, providing it's nasty enough.

Here the rationale is thoroughly nasty and ingenious, for Jesus had said, "Whatever you do to the least of these, you do to me"; from which it follows that if you have a grudge against God you can get back at Him by killing a child, and the more lingering and horrible the death, the more complete will be your revenge.

The central chapters drag somewhat, but the book comes into its own when the killer comes upon and takes over a group of five mildly delinquent boys on an illicit camping expedition. As the killer enforces an escalating regime of beating, buggery and biblical misquotation, Donnelly provides some exceptional suspense writing, made more effective by a teasing construction which promises that at least one boy will survive (though perhaps no more than one) and offers very little clue as to which. Regrettably, he rather undermines it with some hyper-Victorian commentary: "Now, in one short phrase, Doug Nicol redeemed himself from anything he had said in a display of the most noble and courageous altruism." He also keeps it going for far

too long, which both entails both a descent into melodrama and requires that the readers suspend disbelief in some unfamiliar areas, particularly those relating to the physics of elastic materials under tension. Even so, this is a horror novel of superior skill, successfully offering far more depth of character than most writers attempt.

It is the lot of the reviewer to read much that he finds disagreeable, but it's worse to find oneself in broad agreement with ideas unattractively expressed. Such was my experience with the introduction to Michael Flynn's hardish sf collection *The Forest of Time* (Tor, \$23.95), which is fey, vainglorious and simplistic all at once (had I been browsing in a bookshop I'd have passed on), yet I can only take issue with his claim to have invented (with his brother), the Shared Worlds concept in the 50s. The Brontë sisters were there first.

After that the stories themselves were far better than I could hope. Flynn has no characteristic voice, but his ear is good and he has obviously read extensively in sf from the 50s on. There are fairly sharp echoes of a lot of folk I recognize and doubtless others I don't – Robert Silverberg ("The Common Goal of Nature"), Chelsea Quinn Yarbro ("Great, Sweet Mother"), Norman Spinrad ("Grave Reservations"), Poul Anderson (the title story), Theodore Sturgeon ("Melodies of the Heart") and so forth. It's fair to say that nothing here is as good as those writers at top form, but they can't be dismissed as like Silverberg etc. "on a bad day."

Flynn is best at the longer story; the only complete failure is "Spark of Genius," the shortest, which just seems to be getting into its stride

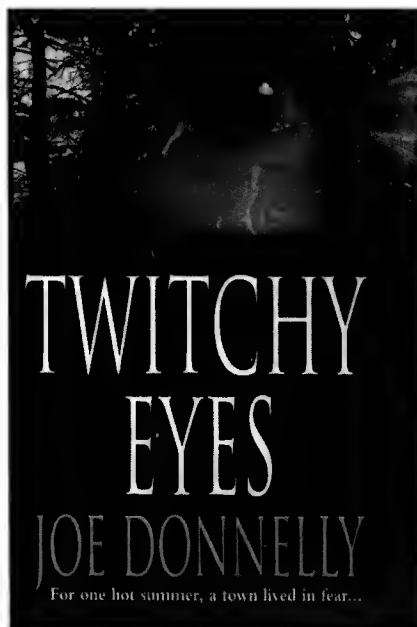
when it ends abruptly on a very flat joke. The longest and most effective story is "Melodies of the Heart," which considers the possibility of a mutation that about doubles longevity while maintaining the general shape of a human life – entailing a long childhood and longer senescence. By a strained but effective coincidence, the doctor who stumbles upon a (very) old lady who has it is the father of a child with progeria. As he unlocks Mae's memories, Deirdre is approaching adolescence – which for her means death.

"The Forest of Time" is a parallel-world story, about a man who goes sideways and can't find his way back. It's set in a version of North America where the USA never happened; European-descended and aboriginal nations are engaged in a never-ending series of brushfire wars, and progress is hampered by poor communications. Unusually, it's told from the viewpoint of the soldier who comes upon the traveller; not unusually, for this collection, it consists almost wholly of talk, as befits the literature of ideas. I would have liked something about the impact of this version of America in the rest of the world, and found some of the ideas about alternative political development less than convincing, but they were intelligently argued which is what matters. This story might expand into a novel.

A similar idea informs "On the Wings of a Butterfly," about a man who goes back to a turning-point in history with the intention of making a world better than the one he knew. Inevitably it suffers by comparison with Sprague de Camp's *Lest Darkness Fall*, the leading character and the historical period both being so much less interesting. Moreover, the twist is telegraphed, as is also true of "The Common Goal of Nature." That story attempts to create "truly alien aliens," but does so by depriving them of one of the senses – a sense enjoyed by all forms of animal life on Earth. As the question of how such a vital sense either failed to evolve or was lost is never addressed, the story falls very flat.

The substitution of talk for action reaches an extreme in "Great, Sweet Mother," a dramatic monologue. "Why is this person sitting on the beach, wolfing down highly flavoured morsels of this and that while dipping into a large pile of books?" you may ask, and in fact someone does, but his/her questions and comments are only indicated, not given; it's the solitary picnicker's tale, and rather a tall tale, but well told.

The general effect is more like reading an anthology from the 70s than the work of a single writer, and had it been presented as such I'd have liked it better. But that introduction, and the coy little afterwords





which Flynn attaches to each story, detract considerably. Flynn should stick to fiction.

A heavy ratio of talk to action has always been typical of the more intellectual sorts of sf, but the later works of Arthur C. Clarke have gone well past the extremes of even his early works. Indeed, *3001: The Final Odyssey* (Del Rey, \$25) contains no action worthy the name until it's 90% over, as all that isn't conversation or ratiocination is description.

I don't mind either per se, but something ought to happen in a novel; this one is a mere guided tour of what Clarke believes the world may, with good sense and a bit of luck, become. The man being guided is Frank Poole, who was murderously cut adrift by HAL all those years ago, and whose vacuum-dried body is brought back to life and consciousness in the dawn of the third millennium.

It's a bland era, where everyone has come round to Clarke's way of thinking about everything that matters. As in all utopias, the people demonstrate an easy courtesy and consideration towards each other which mirrors their inward calm and serenity. Sex is pursued as casually as in *Brave New World*, though with a lot less brio, so when a girl jumps out of Poole's bed in horror and dis-



gust at his circumcision, one can only assume that a common gay preference has been adopted by the straight so as to quell dissent. There are few other prejudices around (except against God), and the sexual preference of some for gorillas (enhanced to the status of rather dim children) arouses little comment. As Poole reflects at one point, "all that he really needed was the occasional healthy, mindless exercise." Ah, romance!

In this time a reputation for wit is very easily come by. One character is "famous back on Earth for at least two of his sayings: 'Civilization and religion are incompatible' and 'Faith is believing what you know isn't true.'" How has mankind progressed since poor slobbs like Voltaire, Wilde, and Bierce grunted the first crude attempts at an aphorism!

Poole, tiring of all this (and the Vegan cuisine), decides to look up an old buddy – Dave Bowman, no less, who has thrown up a *cordon sanitaire* behind which he has set up a god-business among the pseudopiscine dwellers in Europa's airless seas. They have a good talk, mainly about how dull the Europes are, and he goes home.

This might just work if the writing was brilliant, but it isn't. Some of descriptive passages are good, but most of the conversation is insipid and the ratiocination is worse. I've yet to see a single justified use of "despite the fact that," let alone two in one paragraph, but I suppose an author of Clarke's eminence can overrule his editor, if any. Aho! a man should be judged by his best work, not his latest. The book concludes with 25 pages of "Sources and Acknowledgements" for the various technical marvels therein, which are worth more than the text itself.

Chris Gilmore

This time, I'm giving a little more space to a single book than is usual, but it's a particularly deserving case... and one, I'm sure, that is close to our collective heart.

Despite the fact that we seem to have built an entire civilization on our ability – or even our *need* – to pigeonhole all forms of everything, there's an inherent beauty, it seems to me, in things that are not always quite so easy to classify.

Music is the prime example. There are now so many sub-groups that the at-a-glance "File under..." identification system designed decades ago to assist the casual browser now does much to confuse him or her. "Dance," "House," "Rave" and "Ambient" are but a quartet of finely-tuned definitions to explain what, in my teenage years, were simply Tamla, Sue and Atlantic... music categorization by record label, each of which had its own easily identifiable sound but which, collectively, comprised the music one would hear in clubs and discotheques.

The same is true, of course, for literature... notably literature of a *fantastic* (in strict definition terms) variety and particularly science fiction.

The grand old days of all-encompassing sf have now given way to an even greater degree of specialization

## Speculatively Speaking...

Peter Crowther

than could have been dreamed of when the *New Worlds* crew were deemed to be *new wave*: now we have cyberpunk, splatterpunk, hard sf, space opera, space fantasy... and so on. Of course, the same has happened elsewhere in literature, but it is perhaps most markedly noticeable in our own spheres, which, like it or not (purists and elitists be warned!), embrace the old-time traditional values of mainstream fantasy and horror as well as an increasing drift into so-called mainstream fiction and occasionally even into crime and suspense.

What started with sf, of course, is already running away in the other branches: fantasy has given way to high fantasy, comic fantasy and even dark fantasy... this latter definition being now commonly seen as a

euphemism for horror. And we've now got dark suspense coming in to cloud an already complex issue.

All of which is fine so long as you know your way around the shelves and the writers. But many do not.

Was Nick Royle's *Counterparts* truly a horror novel or was it simply a mainstream book that used the difficult subject of self-mutilation (the only horrific aspect of the novel) as a vehicle to comment on alienation within society? And while Alice Hoffman's *Turtle Moon* was ostensibly a mainstream saga of small-town sensibilities, its inclusion of a tree-bound spirit waiting for the person responsible for its death to return and free it might have qualified it for a place on the same shelf as the contemporary fantasy so adored by a legion of Jonathan Carroll fans? But, Royle gets filed under horror, Hoffman under mainstream and Carroll under horror/fantasy. Go figure.

But we're talking here, at least in general terms, about science fiction... because, to all intents and purposes, this is a science-fiction magazine.

Whatever sub-category we want to place individual stories into, there can be no doubt that the truly memorable science fiction is that which gives cause for thought... for consideration and speculation. It is fiction which, while maintaining the all-

important entertainment factor, poses the age-old question of *what if?*... whether in terms of what *might* have been, given other circumstances, or what *could* be. Not surprisingly, the more thoughtful stories falling under the sf banner earned the additional *sobriquet* of *speculative* fiction. As nicknames go, it wasn't a bad one.

It should come as no surprise to anyone reading this column that the great – perhaps even the *greatest* – champion of this more reflective branch of so-called fantastic fiction is *Interzone*. Thus, the recently released *The Best of Interzone* (HarperCollins Voyager, £5.99) is truly an indispensable volume, whether you've squirrelled away all of the past issues or whether this current number is your first.

One point on the use of the word "best" here. None of the 29 stories featured date back beyond October 1990 (Richard Calder's "The Allure" from *IZ* 40 being the earliest), which inevitably calls the book's title into question. But more on that at the end. Certainly, in view of the previous anthologies culled from *Interzone*'s pages, it would be churlish to detract in any way from what is a marvellous collection filled with delights galore.

There's a wonderful line in J. G. Ballard's story "The Message From Mars," concerning a five-man mission to the red planet which returns intact to Earth but whose crew refuses to come out. The authorities, having discounted for various reasons such ruses as threat, starvation, bribery, coercion and controlled explosions, eventually "stoop" to considering playing pop music against the ship's hull or simply rocking the vessel from side to side until the crew come to their senses. It's a delightful image and a nice mixture of absurdity and frustration. But the real beauty in the story is Ballard's stoic refusal to explain what the crew-members had experienced that made them want to isolate themselves for what turns into several decades. The success of the tale is a clear doff-of-the-cap to Stephen King's call never to show to the readers whatever it is that's trying to get in through the door... except here, we are prevented from knowing whatever it was that made this particular group of hapless astronauts reluctant to come *out* of the door, and the last line of the story effectively accentuates the mystery.

Talking of last lines, the closing sentence of Brian Aldiss's "The Eye Opener" also delivers a measured chill. Calling to mind the old movie *The Next Voice You Hear* but replacing God's verbal communication over all of the world's radio sets with the appearance of a huge disembodied

head which is eventually visible to everyone on the planet, Aldiss provides a grippingly surreal discussion of mankind's problems and, perhaps, a refreshingly new take on the Gaea theory.

"Off The Track," David Garnett's subtly unfolding slice of alternate history, has a couple of tourists travelling a post-apocalypse United States held in the grip of rampant pollution and spiralling inflation – simply filling the car with petrol in a



tiny township in the American heartland costs \$1,200 in vouchers, the new national currency. Garnett's premise is a neat vehicle to evaluate the real things of meaning – such as old paperback Westerns and rock'n'roll records, so taken for granted in our own world but revered in this one as cultural artefacts – and to warn against the economic (as well as the moral) repercussions of war. Okay, it *may* have been done before... but rarely (if ever) this well.

With "The Man Who Read A Book," an hilarious tale about the strengthening movement away from reading, Thomas Disch also has a few warnings about the way the US is going... and lest we become too complacent let us not forget that what America does today everyone else does tomorrow. Here, a young man fresh from pre-vocational classes in "computer programming, hair styling, substance abuse counselling, auto repair and maintenance, cake decorating and introductory Sanskrit" despairs of ever finding a job that suits his particular talents... until his parole office suggests he read books for money. Answering a questionnaire sent by the Yaddo Reading Institute of Boca Raton, Florida, the ambitious

man manages to answer some of the multiple-choice questions with ease (America's best selling author since 1984 is undoubtedly Stephen King) but others he's less sure of. This results in his attributing to Tennessee Williams the novel *A Salesman Named Desire* and answering the question "What is hyperbole?" with the choice "a rare disorder of the lymph nodes." And it gets funnier. But what starts out as a damning parody of vanity publishing and all its attendant sub-categories suddenly side-steps – and neatly so – into all-out farce with the man making huge amounts of money from his novel about sex and killing, *I Iced Madame Bovary*. Imagine Kurt Vonnegut collaborating with Leo Rosten (of H\*Y\*M\*A\*N K\*A\*P\*L\*A\*N fame) and you'll get some idea of this wonderful story's flavour.

But it's not all laughs.

There are cautionary tales galore, from Graham Joyce's and Peter Hamilton's wince-making "Eat Reecebread," a Dick-like (no pun intended) tale set in a near-future Leicester coming to terms with a growing incidence world-wide of hermaphrodite births, to Ben Jeapes's "The Data Class," in which a rebellious computer-dwelling artificial intelligence assumes organizational skills (and Marxist tendencies) and develops a neat (and meaningful) new logo for itself. And I haven't even mentioned Ian Lee's child-bearing pigs, Eric Brown's virtual reality hospice, Brian Stableford's talking bird, Ian MacLeod's family of shape-shifters or Mary Gentle's topical tale of a society "blessed" with the technology to enable and even promote child-abuse as a means of parental therapy.

The invention and talent on display here are absolutely first-class and there isn't a single dud tale to spoil the picnic. But the best part of it all is that, except for their uniformly high standards, no one story is in any way similar to any other. But then *we* already know that to be the case.

When you categorize, you weaken. *Interzone* stories are *Interzone* stories... as ideal a dish of fodder for those people who enjoy horror as they are for those who revel in fantasy or in science fiction. These are 29 of the 300 or so tales that appeared in the 61 issues of the magazine from numbers 40 to 100. But "The Best"? Well, that call depends on where you're sitting to watch the game. Of course, the only way to be sure that Pringle is doing his job right – both in editing the magazine generally and in compiling these occasional wonderful collections – is to make sure of your regular copy and subscribe. Tell your friends.

Pete Crowther

# CLEARANCE SALE!

In order to clear storage space, we have drastically reduced the price on our early back-issue stocks.

Until further notice, any of *Interzone's* **first 60 issues** which remain in print are available to inland readers at just

\*Price valid in the UK only. £2 overseas;  
\$3 USA. No extra charge for postage!

**PRICES  
SLASHED**

**£1.50\*** each  
(postage included)

#3 Autumn 1982: stories by Carter, Kilworth, Saxton, etc.

#14 Winter 1985/86: McAuley, Newman, Sterling, Watson, etc.

#19 Spring 1987: Ferguson, McAuley, Newman, Baxter, etc.

#25 Sep/Oct 1988: Griffith, Langford, Preuss, Watson, etc.

#26 Nov/Dec 1988: Brown, Pratchett, Shaw, Sladek, etc.

#27 Jan/Feb 1989: Bayley, Brosnan, Robinson, Shaw, etc.

#28 Mar/Apr 1989: Baxter, Campbell, Newman, Rucker/Laidlaw

#29 May/Jun 1989: Egan, Fowler, Kilworth, Mann, etc.

#30 Jul/Aug 1989: Ballard, Brooke, Goldstein, MacLeod, etc.

#31 Sep/Oct 1989: Brown, Gribbin, Jones, Stross, etc.

#32 Nov/Dec 1989: Bayley, Calder, McDonald, Royle, etc.

#33 Jan/Feb 1990: Carroll, Newman, Watson, etc.

#34 Mar/Apr 1990: Calder, Brooke, Griffith, MacLeod, etc.

#35 May 1990: Baxter, Bayley, Disch, Stableford, etc.

#36 Jun 1990: Egan, Ings, Newman, Reynolds, etc.

#37 Jul 1990: Bayley, Broome, Egan, Lee, Stross, etc.

#38 Aug 1990: special Aldiss issue, Bear, Stableford, etc.

#39 Sep 1990: Brooke, Garnett, MacLeod, Tuttle, etc.

#40 Oct 1990: Calder, Gibson/Sterling, Gribbin, etc.

#41 Nov 1990: Brown, Egan, McAuley, Royle, Webb, etc.

#42 Dec 1990: all-female issue, Fowler, Murphy, Tuttle

#43 Jan 1991: Jeapes, Langford, Newman/Byrne, Shaw, etc.

#44 Feb 1991: Brown, Christopher, Egan, Siddall, etc.

#45 Mar 1991: Baxter, Holdstock, Landis, Stableford, etc.

#46 Apr 1991: Beckett, McAuley, Mapes, Moorcock, etc.

#47 May 1991: special Aboriginal issue, Ellison, Pohl, etc.

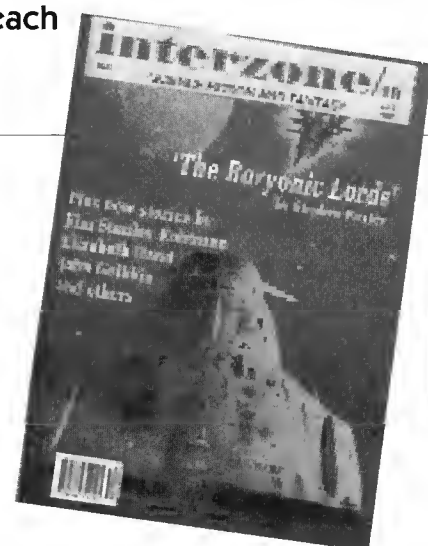
#48 Jun 1991: Egan, Griffith, Kilworth, Newman/Byrne, etc.

#49 Jul 1991: Baxter, Gribbin, Hand, Robinson, Webb, etc.

#50 Aug 1991: Egan, Griffith, index to first 50 issues, etc.

#51 Sep 1991: **MILLION** #5 issue, story by Newman, etc.

#52 Oct 1991: Baxter, Brown, Gentle, Ian Lee, etc.



#53 Nov 1991: Evans, Feeley, Landis, MacLeod, etc.

#54 Dec 1991: Molly Brown's IZ debut, Brin, Langford, etc.

#55 Jan 1992: Baxter, Di Filippo, Egan, Royle, etc.

#56 Feb 1992: Ballard, Beckett, Redd, Watson, etc.

#57 Mar 1992: Egan, Goonan, Langford, Lethem, Wilder, etc.

#58 Apr 1992: 10th anniversary, Ballard, Irwin, Joyce, etc.

#59: May 1992: Bayley, Brown, McMullen, Newman, etc.

#60: Jun 1992: special fantasy issue, Landis, etc.

**OUT OF PRINT**

Please note that issues 1-2, 4-13, 15-18 and 20-24 inclusive are now unavailable. Later back-issues (i.e. number 61 onwards) cost £3 each inland; but the issues listed above you may have for just £1.50 each (£2 overseas; \$3 USA). No extra for postage! Please make your cheques or postal orders payable to *Interzone* and send them to 217 Preston Drive, Brighton BN1 6FL, UK.



**Also available from the same address at the same price:** the 12 remaining issues of *MILLION: The Magazine About Popular Fiction*, Jan 1991-Jun 1993. We still have stocks of all 14 issues except numbers 2 and 5. Just £1.50 each (£2 overseas; \$3 USA).

## BOOKS RECEIVED



FEBRUARY  
1997

The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the month specified above. Official publication dates, where known, are given in *italics* at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Beagle, Peter. **A Fine and Private Place.** Souvenir Press, ISBN 0-285-63371-6, 221pp, B-format paperback, cover by Colin Sullivan, £6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1960; this reissue contains a two-page preface by the author which is dated 1978.) *20th March 1997.*

Béalu, Marcel. **The Experience of the Night.** Translated by Christine Donougher. Dedalus, ISBN 1-873982-67-4, 210pp, B-format paperback, cover by Lise Weisgerber, £8.99. (Literary fantasy novel, first published in French, 1945; according to the blurb, this "became a cult novel amongst the surrealists, gaining an almost mythic status as the masterpiece of the French Kafka"; the author was born in 1908, but we're not told his death date.) *20th March 1997.*

Becker, Allienne R., ed. **Visions of the Fantastic: Selected Essays from the Fifteenth International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts.** "Contributions to the Study of Science Fiction and Fantasy, Number 68." Greenwood Press, ISBN

0-313-29725-8, xxi+20Spp, hardcover, £43.95. (Anthology of academic essays about various aspects of sf, fantasy and horror; first published in the USA, 1996; contributors include Brian Aldiss, James W. Flannery, Earl G. Ingersoll, Janeen Webb and many others less well known; subjects range from Margaret Atwood, Mircea Eliade and Russell Hoban, through Irish fairy tales, *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*, and Francis Ford Coppola's films, to Katherine Anne Porter, Nathanael West and W. B. Yeats; an eclectic volume indeed; this is the American first edition with a British price; it's distributed in the UK by Eurospan, 3 Henrietta St., London WC2E 8LU.) *Late entry: January publication, received in February 1997.*

Brandewyne, Rebecca. **Pas-sion Moon Rising.** Severn House, ISBN 0-7278-5158-6, xiv+434pp, hardcover, £17.99. (Romantic fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1988; Brandewyne [a pseudonym, if ever we heard one] is a well-known name in the romance field, but this is the first of her books that we have been sent for review in a fantasy context.) *27th March 1997.*

Bury, Stephen. **Interface.** Signet, ISBN 0-45-145483-9, 583pp, A-format paperback, cover by Bruce Jensen, £5.99. (Near-future sf comedy-thriller, first published in the USA, 1994; "Stephen Bury" is a joint pseudonym of Neal Stephenson "and another writer" – the publishers are being coy about who this second person is, but in fact it's Stephenson's uncle, J. Frederick George.) *27th February 1997.*

Buxton, James. **The Wishing Tree.** Orion, ISBN 0-75280-881-8, 330pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1996; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 113.) *3rd March 1997.*

Carpenter, Humphrey. **The Inklings: C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Charles Williams and Their Friends.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-261-10347-4, x+287pp, B-format paperback, £8.99.

(Group biography of the three named fantasy writers and their circle; first published in 1978; winner of the Somerset Maugham Award for biography; like Carpenter's separate biography of Tolkien, this is an excellent book – highly recommended.) *3rd March 1997.*

Coe, David B. **Children of Amarid: Book I of The LonTobyn Chronicles.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85906-6, 383pp, hardcover, \$25.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; a debut novel by a new American, it seems to be standard heroic fantasy – with a map.) *May 1997.*

Feist, Raymond E. **Rage of a Demon King.** "Serpentwar Saga, Volume Three." Voyager, ISBN 0-00-224149-8, xi+463pp, hardcover, cover by Geoff Taylor, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA [?], 1997.) *7th April 1997.*

## MICHAEL MOORCOCK

THE NEW NATURE OF THE CATASTROPHE  
EDITED BY LANGDON JONES AND MICHAEL MOORCOCK



"THE APOCRYPHAL JERRY CORNELIUS STORIES BY BRIAN W. ALDISS NORMAN SPINRAD  
M. JOHN HARRISON JAMES SALLIS LANGDON JONES SIMON INGS MAYN M JAKUBOWSKI  
AND OTHERS INCLUDING MICHAEL MOORCOCK

THE TALE OF  
THE ETERNAL CHAMPION  
VOLUME 1

Fulton, Roger. **The Encyclopedia of TV Science Fiction.** "New edition." Boxtree/TV Times, ISBN 0-7522-1150-1, 697pp [plus unpaginated prelims], C-format paperback, £18.99. (Reference guide to sf television programmes, first published in 1990; this is the third edition; the second edition appeared only two years ago, and although this one has slightly fewer pages it has been re-set throughout in smaller type; nothing appears to have been dropped, and much has been

added [*Cold Lazarus*, *Dark Skies*, *Neverwhere*, *Sliders*, *Space: Above and Beyond*, *3rd Rock from the Sun*, etc.]; for better or for worse, we are living through the Golden Age of TV sf, and this impressively researched tome has established itself as the bible of the field; it gives full details of most sf plays, made-for-TV movies, serials and series shown on British television since the early 1950s; it's alphabetically arranged by title, and illustrated with eight pages of photographs; recommended; as we pointed out before, though, there are still omissions, particularly in the area of serials and "one-offs": for example, Giles Cooper's lengthy two-part adaptation of Constantine FitzGibbon's novel *When the Kissing Had to Stop*, from 1962 [a very early example of a TV-sf "mini-series"?], and also his 140-minute blockbuster play *The Other Man*, from 1964 [novelized by himself for Panther Books in the same year].) *7th March 1997.*

Green, Simon R. **Deathstalker War.** Vista, ISBN 0-575-60061-6, 570pp, A-format paperback, cover by Peter Mennim, £5.99. (Sf novel, first edition; sequel to *Deathstalker* and *Deathstalker Rebellion*; it's blurb'd as "a monumental adventure in the tradition of *Star Wars*.") *27th March 1997.*

Gunn, James. **Isaac Asimov: The Foundations of Science Fiction.** Revised edition. Scarecrow Press [distributed in Britain by Shelwing Ltd, 4 Pleydell Gdns., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN], ISBN 0-8108-3129-5,

ix+276pp, hardcover, £34.20. (Critical study of the major American sf writer; first published in the USA, 1996; the original edition appeared from the New York wing of Oxford University Press in 1982, and won the following year's Hugo Award for best non-fiction; this new edition has been "revised, updated and expanded to account for his prolific final decade"; the result is an efficient and well-informed primer on Asimov's work; this is the US edition with a British price.) *24th April 1997.*



Hamilton, Peter F. **The Reality Dysfunction: Book One of the Night's Dawn Trilogy.** Pan, ISBN 0-330-34032-8, 1225pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jim Burns, £7.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1996; reviewed, quite glowingly, by James Lovegrove in *Interzone* 106; the biggest sf novel ever released between one set of covers continues to shrink: first there was the hardcover, then there was the trade paperback, and now Pan have sent us two versions of this mass-market edition – one priced at £5.99 and another at £7.99; the latter, it seems, is the correct price; meanwhile the promised sequel, *The Neutronium Alchemist*, has been put back from January to October 1997.) 7th March 1997.

Heminggson, Michael. **Minstrels: A Novel.** Permeable Press [47 Noe St., #4, San Francisco, CA 94114-1017, USA], ISBN 1-882633-23-7, 148pp, trade paperback, \$10. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; the author is a California-based small-press writer, poet and playwright, one of whose productions rejoices in the title *Three Fucks and a Blowjob*; this may well be his first sf book.) March 1997.

Holt, Tom. **Open Sesame.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-476-6, 320pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Lee, £15.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received.) 5th June 1997.

Jones, J. V. **Master and Fool.** "The Book of Words, Volume III." Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-464-2, 532pp, hardcover, cover by Darrell K. Sweet, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1996; J. V. Jones [Julie Victoria Jones, not to be confused with Jenny Jones] is a new British author, born 1963, now living in California.) 3rd April 1997.

Jordan, Robert. **A Crown of Swords: Book Seven of The Wheel of Time.** "The international no. 1 bestseller." Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-403-0, xi+762pp, A-format paperback, cover by Darrell K. Sweet, £17.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1996.) 20th March 1997.

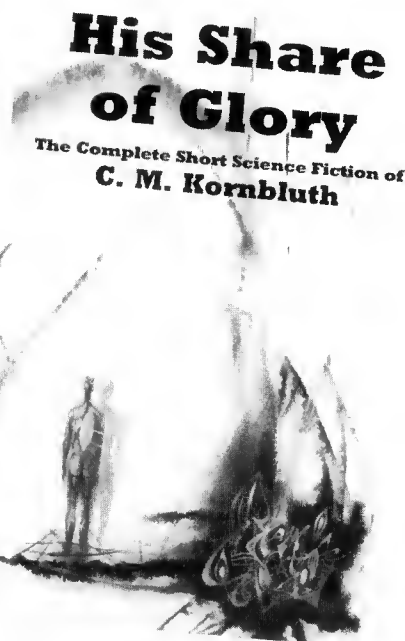
Kilworth, Garry. **The Princely Flower: Book II of The Navigator Kings.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-469-3, xvi+365pp, hardcover, cover by Mark Harrison, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received.) 15th May 1997.

Kornbluth, C. M. **His Share of Glory: The Complete Short Science Fiction of C. M. Kornbluth.** Edited by Timothy P. Szczesuil. Introduction by Frederik Pohl. NESFA Press [PO Box 809, Framingham, MA 01701-0203, USA], ISBN 0-915368-60-9, xx+670pp, hardcover, cover by Richard Powers, \$27. (Sf collection; first edition; books like this, and the Sturgeon volume listed below, demonstrate how the science-fiction community looks after its own: Cyril Kornbluth died, at the age of 35, in 1958; within the field he has never been forgotten, and this well-produced 56-story tome testifies to his work's endurance; nor is this book just a nostalgic old-timers' project: the editor, Tim Szczesuil, is a comparative youngster who confesses that he'd never even heard of Kornbluth as recently as 1987.) No date shown: received in February 1997.

Lackey, Mercedes, and Larry Dixon. **The Silver Gryphon: Book Three of The Mage Wars.** Illustrated by Dixon. Orion/Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-497-8, 322pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1996.) 3rd March 1997.

Lapine, Warren, and Stephen Pagel, eds. **Absolute Magnitude.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86335-7, 317pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Sf anthology, first edition; proof copy received; *Absolute Magnitude* is the title of an American small-press magazine [which began life a few years ago under the title *Harsh Mistress* – a Heinlein allusion that the world at large didn't comprehend!]; it's devoted to hard-edged sf adventure tales, as represented in this anthology, the first to be drawn from the magazine's pages, by

authors such as Terry Bisson, Chris Bunch, C. J. Cherryh, Hal Clement, Don D'Amassa, Alan Dean Foster, Janet Kagan, Geoffrey A. Landis, Shariann Lewitt, Barry B. Longyear and Allen Steele, among others.) May 1997.



Lee, Adam. **The Dark Shore: Book One of The Dominions of Irth.** Avon, ISBN 0-380-97441-X, xv+410pp, hardcover, \$24. (Fantasy novel, first edition [?]; proof copy received; this is billed as the debut book of "a major new voice in the field of epic fantasy"; the author is possibly British, as the book is dedicated "To Nick Austin" and bears a 1996 copyright date – is this perhaps a title that Hodder & Stoughton issued in the UK last year, one that we missed during a period when they weren't sending us review copies? [these little breakdowns occur from time to time: they usually happen just after we've said something particularly complimentary about the publisher in question, and this phenomenon is known as Sod's Law]; ... ah! found it! – unless this is merely a coincidence of title, which is unlikely given editor Nick Austin's involvement, "Adam Lee" is a pseudonym for Hawaiian writer A. A. Attanasio; Chris Gilmore reviewed this book [Hodder/NEL, November 1996] in *Interzone* 111; presumably sf veteran Attanasio is trying to relaunch his flagging career in the

States, "Robin Hobb"-style.) 12th March 1997.

Levi, Antonia. **Samurai from Outer Space: Understanding Japanese Animation.** Open Court [315 Fifth St., PO Box 300, Peru, IL 61354-0300, USA], ISBN 0-8126-9332-9, x+169pp, C-format paperback, £15.50. (Study of Japanese animated sf/fantasy films, first published in the USA, 1996; it's illustrated with 16 pages of colour plates; this is the American first edition with a British price, distributed in the UK by Eurospan, 3 Henrietta St., London WC2E 8LU.) Late entry: October 1996 publication, received in February 1997.

Marks, Graham. **Skitzo.** Point SF, ISBN 0-590-13647-X, 204pp, A-format paperback, cover by David Wyatt, £3.99. (Young-adult sf novel, first edition [?]; the publishers don't say, but this may be a debut novel by a new British writer.) February 1997.

Matthews, Susan R. **An Exchange of Hostages.** AvoNova, ISBN 0-380-78913-2, 372pp, A-format paperback, \$5.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; this is a debut book by a new American writer, described as "a psychological novel of suspense and horror" set on a station in outer space; like Gene Wolfe's *Book of the New Sun*, it has a torturer as hero.) April 1997.

May, Julian. **Magnificat: Book Three of the Galactic Milieu Trilogy.** Pan, ISBN 0-330-32305-9, 561pp, A-format paperback, cover by Stephen Bradbury, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1996; reviewed by Ken Brown in *Interzone* 108; this is one of those rare phenomena [we mean rare in these days of so-called "vertical publishing"] – a "crossover" publication: it was published in UK hardcover by HarperCollins/Voyager and now it has been paperbacked by Macmillan/Pan; they even share the same cover art!) 7th March 1997.

Pepper, Mark. **The Short Cut.** New English Library, ISBN 0-340-68221-3, 291pp,



A-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £5.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1996; a debut novel by a new British writer, born 1966.) 20th March 1997.

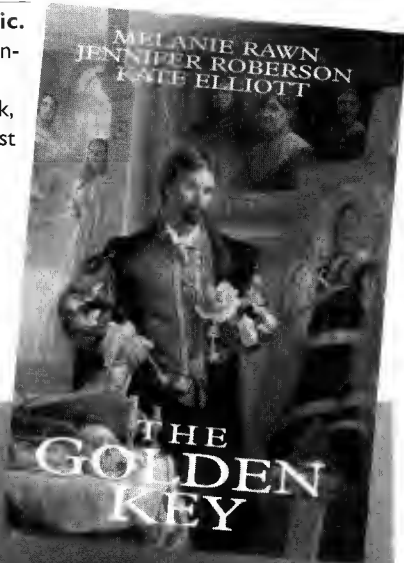
Preston, Lincoln. **Mount Dragon.** "The chilling new bio-thriller from the author of *Relic*." Bantam, ISBN 0-553-50438-X, 476pp, A-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £5.99. (Sf/horror novel, first published in the USA, 1996; *Locus* described it as "a Michael Crichton-style thriller with immensely more detail paid to the level of writing ... first class"; "Lincoln Preston" is a pseudonym for Douglas Preston and Lincoln Child, the former an ex-museum curator, the latter a former publisher's editor; the Richard Preston quoted on the cover [author of something called *The Hot Zone*] is Douglas Preston's brother [acknowledged inside as "my brother Dick"]; since when have publishers thought it appropriate to have books blurbed by authors' relatives? – all's fair in love and commerce, we suppose.) 10th April 1997.

Preston, Lincoln. **The Relic.** "Now a terrifying film." Bantam, ISBN 0-553-50496-7, 442pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf/horror novel, first published in the USA as *Relic*, 1995; this is the movie tie-in reissue, with the title altered by the addition of a definite article; the film of the novel is directed by Peter Hyams

and produced by Gale Ann Hurd.) 10th April 1997.

Rawn, Melanie. **The Ruins of Ambrai: Exiles, Book One.** Pan, ISBN 0-330-34419-6, 922pp, A-format paperback, cover by Michael Whelan, £7.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1994; 3rd Pan printing.) 7th March 1997.

Rawn, Melanie, Jennifer Roberson and Kate Elliott. **The Golden Key.** Macmillan, ISBN 0-333-66459-0, 868pp, hardcover, cover by Michael Whelan, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1996; hitherto the authors have forged separate careers as DAW Books' toimesters, and here they come together for the first time to produce a tome-an-a-half; the least well-known of them, "Kate Elliott," is a pseudonym for Alis A. Rasmussen; about a never-never world of magical paintings and artists in search of the "golden key" to their craft, it has a pseudo-Portuguese flavour [judging from the made-up names]; the striking cover painting, by multi-award-winning artist Whelan, would seem to be a self-portrait [!].) 7th March 1997.



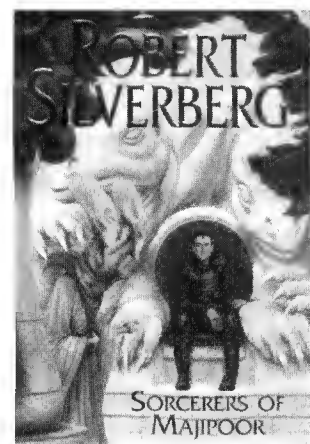
Roberts, Robin. **Anne McCaffrey: A Critical Companion.** "Critical Companions to Popular Contemporary Writers." Greenwood Press, ISBN 0-313-29450-X, xi+186pp, hardcover, £23.95. (Critical primer on a leading American sf writer; first published in the USA, 1996; the first of this series we saw, on Dean Koontz, was listed here a few months ago; this one has arrived along with three others, on Robin Cook, Michael Crichton and Anne Rice [see below, under Smith, Stookey and Trembley]; they seem to be written to a fairly rigid formula, each beginning with a chapter on "The Life of..." followed by a chapter on the genre background, followed by a chronological jog through the major works, and rounded off with a fairly detailed bibliography and index; they are straightforward, efficiently-done critiques for students and other young readers; they all seem to be written by young women academics, and at a uniform £23.95 each they are reasonably priced by today's non-fiction standards; this is the American first edition with a British price, distributed in the UK by Eurospan, 3 Henrietta St., London WC2E 8LU.) Late entry: June 1996 publication, received in February 1997.

Rucker, Rudy. **Freeware.** Avon, ISBN 0-380-79278-8, x+288pp, trade paperback, £13. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; follow-up to the author's Philip K. Dick Award-winning novels *Software* and *Wetware*; an early extract from this appeared in *Interzone* 94 [Charles Platt's issue] as "The Loonies Need You.") May 1997.

Sandner, David. **The Fantastic Sublime: Romanticism and Transcendence in Nineteenth-Century Children's Fantasy Literature.** "Contributions to the Study of Science Fiction and Fantasy, Number 69." Greenwood Press, ISBN 0-313-30084-4,

vi+160pp, hardcover, £39.95. (Thesis on juvenile fantasy, first published in the USA, 1996; it deals with the authors one might expect – the fairytale writers, George MacDonald, Kenneth Grahame, etc; but, surprisingly, there's also a chapter on Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*; this is the American first edition with a British price, distributed in the UK by Eurospan, 3 Henrietta St., London WC2E 8LU.) Late entry: January publication, received in February 1997.

Sawyer, Robert J. **Frameshift.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86325-X, 347pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; the latest by the rising Canadian author who won the 1995 Nebula Award for *The Terminal Experiment*.) May 1997.



Silverberg, Robert. **Sorcerers of Majipoor.** Macmillan, ISBN 0-333-64486-7, 534pp, hardcover, cover by Jim Burns, £16.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in the USA [?], 1997; this, the latest lump of goods to fall from the production line of "Agberg Ltd," is the fifth "Majipoor" book and, it seems, the biggest one yet; it's actually a prequel to the others, set "a thousand years before Lord Valentine.") 7th March 1997.

Smith, Jennifer. **Anne Rice: A Critical Companion.** "Critical Companions to Popular Contemporary Writers." Greenwood Press, ISBN 0-313-29612-X, xi+193pp, hardcover, £23.95. (Critical primer on a leading American horror writer; first published in the USA, 1996; this is the American first edition with a British price, distributed in the UK by Eurospan, 3 Henrietta St., London WC2E 8LU.) Late

Left: from left, Jennifer Roberson, Melanie Rawn, and Kate Elliott



entry: November 1996 publication, received in February 1997.

Stookey, Lorena Laura. **Robin Cook: A Critical Companion.** "Critical Companions to Popular Contemporary Writers." Greenwood Press, ISBN 0-313-29578-6, xi+210pp, hardcover, £23.95. (Critical primer on a leading American sf/thriller writer; first published in the USA, 1996; this is the American first edition with a British price, distributed in the UK by Eurospan, 3 Henrietta St., London WC2E 8LU.) *Lote entry: November 1996 publication, received in February 1997.*

Sturgeon, Theodore. **Kill-dozer!: The Complete Stories of Theodore Sturgeon, Volume III.** Edited by Paul Williams. Foreword by Robert Silverberg. North Atlantic Books [PO Box 12327, Berkeley, CA 94712, USA], ISBN 1-55643-227-S, xv+367pp, hardcover, cover by Paul Orban, \$25. (Sf/fantasy collection, first edition; more than

ten years after Sturgeon's death, Williams has gathered together all of his stories, published and unpublished, arranged them in chronological order with notes, and will be publishing them over the next few years in a series which may stretch to ten volumes; this third volume contains stories written between 1941, when Sturgeon was 23, and early 1946; among the better-known pieces are the title novella, "Medusa," "The Chromium Helmet" and "Mewhu's Jet"; there are also four never-previously-published stories [mostly short vignettes]; we received the first volume in this series, *The Ultimote Egoist*, two years ago, but never saw the second, *Microcosmic God*; as we said of the initial volume, this is a must-buy for all Sturgeon enthusiasts.) *Lote entry: December 1996 publication, received in February 1997.*

Sullivan, Tricia. **Someone to Watch Over Me.** Orion/Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-S23-0, 289pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Sf

novel, first edition; proof copy received; there is a simultaneous C-format paperback edition [not seen]; the author's second novel, following her 1995 debut *Lethe*.) *19th May 1997.*

Thorne, Nicola. **Haunted Landscape.** Severn House, ISBN 0-7278-S173-X, 209pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Romantic gothic novel, first published as *Hommersleigh* by Rosemary Ellerbeck, 1976; Ellerbeck would seem to be the author's real name; she has also written under other pseudonyms, e.g. her *Return to Wuthering Heights* [1977] was bylined "Anna L'Estrange.") *27th March 1997.*

Trembley, Elizabeth A. **Michael Crichton: A Critical Companion.** "Critical Companions to Popular Contemporary Writers." Greenwood Press, ISBN 0-313-29414-3, xi+192pp, hardcover, £23.95. (Critical primer on a leading American sf/thriller writer; first published in the USA, 1996; this is the American first edition with a

British price, distributed in the UK by Eurospan, 3 Henrietta St., London WC2E 8LU; further volumes in this series, which we have not yet seen, cover V. C. Andrews, Tom Clancy, Arthur C. Clarke, Howard Fast, John Jakes, Stephen King, Colleen McCullough, John Saul and Gore Vidal, among others.) *Lote entry: February 1996 publication, received in February 1997.*

Zindel, Paul. **The Doom Stone.** "A horror movie in print." Red Fox, ISBN 0-09-954271-4, 133pp, A-format paperback, £3.50. (Juvenile sf/horror novel, first published in the USA, 1995; Zindel [not to be confused with sf novelist David Zindell] is a well-established kids' writer, but this is the first of his books we've been sent for review; his previous title, *Loch*, was described as "Jurassic Pork on water"; "Red Fox" is an imprint name of Random House, which makes it a sibling imprint of Legend Books.) *6th March 1997.*

Claremont, Chris, and George Lucas. **Shadow Dawn: Second in the Chronicles of the Shadow War.** Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-04056-2, 415pp, hardcover, cover by Ciruelo Cabral, £15.99. (Sharecrop fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1997; we've decided to list this under "Spinoffery" as a sharecrop: it seems to have been written entirely by Claremont, although based on a "story by" Lucas and copyrighted "Lucas-film Ltd"; what makes it and its predecessor volume rather odd examples of spinoffery, however, is that the original film project to which they're tied is nowhere mentioned — perhaps they're set in the world of Lucas's failed fantasy epic *Willow*?) *13th March 1997.*

Gillis, S. J. **The Gillis Guide to The Prisoner.** SJG Communications Services [PO Box 44, Shrewsbury, SY2 SWB], ISBN 0-9528441-1-7, 89pp plus 6 unnumbered prelim pages, very large-format paperback, cover by Dave Lucas, £10.99. (Alphabetically-arranged guide to the people behind the *Prisoner* TV series of the 1960s; first edition; like

## Spinoffery

*This is a list of all books received that fall into those sub-types of sf, fantasy and horror which may be termed novelizations, recursive fictions, spinoffs, sequels by other hands, shared worlds and sharecrops (including non-fiction about shared worlds, films and TV, etc.). The collective term "Spinoffery" is used for the sake of brevity.*

its larger predecessor volume, *The Gillis Guide to Trek* [listed here about eight months ago], this has a simple black, white and red cover and may not at first look very attractive, but its large, double-columned, small-printed pages contain a great deal of information; recommended.) *No date shown: received in February 1997.*

Jones, Langdon, and Moorcock, Michael, eds. **The New Nature of the Catastrophe.** "The Tale of the Eternal Champion, Vol. 9." Orion/Millennium, ISBN 0-75280-600-9, xvi+S00pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mark Reeve, £6.99. (Shared-character ["Jerry Cornelius"] sf anthology, first published in this form in 1993; an earlier, much smaller, edition was entitled *The Nature of the Catastrophe* [1971]; as well as most of the contents of that old volume

[stories by Brian Aldiss, M. John Harrison, James Sallis, Norman Spinrad, etc], this edition contains all the pieces from Moorcock's collection *The Lives and Times of Jerry Cornelius* [1976] plus his story "The Murderer's Song" [1987] and others, and some newer material by other hands, including a story by Simon Ings [from David Garnett's anthology *New Worlds 2*, 1992] and a piece from the long-silent Langdon Jones; critic John Clute is in here too, with his brilliant essay on Jerry Cornelius which first appeared as the introduction to the US edition of *The Cornelius Chronicles* [1977]; there are also copious illustrations by the late Mal Dean and others, and a useful bibliographical article by John Davey; although Michael Moorcock is presented as "author" on the spine, Langdon Jones is given

as primary editor on the title page; one story, Moorcock's "All the Way Round Again" [originally "The Enigma Windows" in *Fobulous Horbours*, 1995] has been added to this paperback edition, and Davey's bibliography has been updated.) *3rd March 1997.*

McIntee, David A. **The Dark Path.** "Doctor Who: The Missing Adventures." Virgin/Doctor Who, ISBN 0-426-20503-0, 295pp, A-format paperback, cover by Alister Pearson, £4.99. (Sf television-series spinoff novel, first edition.) *21st March 1997.*

Platt, Marc. **Lungbarrow.** "The New Adventures." Virgin, ISBN 0-426-20502-2, 309pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £4.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first edition; again, the "Doctor Who" logo is missing from this book: the series is almost at an end, since the BBC have clawed back the rights to the character, but we are promised a rebirth in a couple of months' time when Virgin's "New Adventures" will be relaunched as a non-*Doctor Who* shared-universe series.) *21st March 1997.*



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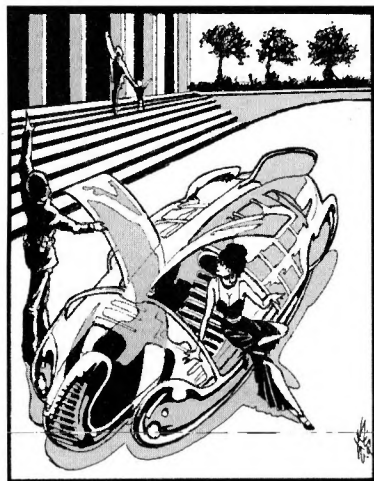
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**HARM'S WAY** – "What if Charles Dickens had written a space opera?" (*Locus*) – large paperback, £3.50. *The Hour of the Thin Ox* and *Other Voices*, paperbacks, £1.50 each. Prices include postage. Colin Greenland, 98 Sturton St., Cambridge CB1 2QA (note new address).

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## COMING NEXT MONTH

Alastair Reynolds returns with another sprightly hard-sf tale; also, good new fiction from Stephen Baxter, Paul Di Filippo and others. Plus all our usual features and reviews. So watch out for the June *Interzone*, number 120, on sale in May. (Coming soon: more from Greg Egan, Dominic Green, James Lovegrove, Kim Newman & Eugene Byrne, and many others...)



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